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Appropriate Fields of Action:
Nineteenth-Century Representations of
the Female Philanthropist and the
Parochial Sphere

by

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Declaration

This thesis is entirely the candidate's own work and has not been submitted for a degree at another university. Word count: 76, 799.

Abstract

Literary representations of female philanthropy challenge the separate spheres dichotomy that we continue to associate with nineteenth-century literature and society, as the work of the philanthropic heroine instead depicts a diversity of social spaces located between the family home and the worlds of commerce and politics. These social spaces – one of the most important being the parish – are represented as highly receptive to the influence of middle- and upper-class women by the writers of my study, thereby demonstrating how female authors could formulate the geography of their fictions to support their participation in contemporary social debate. In this thesis I use the term ‘parochial spheres’ to describe these spaces, which include the landed estate, the village and the military regiment. My emphasis on parochial spheres calls attention to the gentlewoman’s relationships with rural and provincial environments. I use the concept of ‘borderline’ female citizenship to think about these relationships, as it indicates the potential power of the philanthropic heroine in her community, as well as the likelihood of power contests between the female philanthropist and her male contemporaries.

The writers of my thesis are mainly drawn from the Victorian period. However, I also examine works by Hannah More, and the image of the philanthropist across the period. More is crucial to the representation of female philanthropy, as female authors interact with a tradition of conservative reform popularised by the Evangelical polymath at the beginning of the period. Embedded within this tradition is the narrative of maternalism, which enables women writers to depict their heroines as the protective conservers of the social order, but also as the generators of new, feminised solutions to public questions of reform. These fluctuations between conservation and reform reveal the significance of the parochial sphere to women’s writing during the Victorian period.

Introduction

‘We consider our own parish as our more appropriate field of action’ – Hannah More, *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* (1808)

*

‘Only you, my lady, lead the thoughts of the parish’ – Elizabeth Gaskell, *My Lady Ludlow* (1859)

*

‘Marcella walked as usual down to the village. She was teeming with plans for her new kingdom, and could not keep herself out of it’ – Mrs. Humphry Ward, *Marcella* (1894)

*

Hannah More’s claiming of the local parish as the gentlewoman’s ‘more appropriate field of action’ serves as the starting point of this study, which explores the representation of the socially genteel woman in rural and provincial space by a selection of nineteenth-century writers.¹ With the notable exception of Henry Thompson, the biographer of Hannah More, all of these writers are female. As the power of Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Lady Ludlow* to lead her community and Marcella Boyce’s perception of the local village as her kingdom demonstrate, More’s argument for the significance of women to their surrounding communities endured and developed throughout the Victorian era.² These images of local female power found in the works of More, Gaskell and Ward, are also evident in novels by Charlotte Brontë, Charlotte Yonge and George Eliot. When read together, these texts call for a re-nuancing of traditional understandings of women and space in nineteenth-century literature and culture,

¹ Hannah More, *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*, (London: Cadell, 1808; repr. Ontario: Broadview Editions, 2007), p. 229.

² See Elizabeth Gaskell, *My Lady Ludlow*, (first published in *Round the Sofa*, London: Sampson Lowe, 1859; repr. Gloucester: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1985); Mrs Humphry Ward, *Marcella*, (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1894; repr. Ontario: Broadview Press, 2002).

which typically focus on urban environments.³ Different to the streets of Manchester or London, parochial environments of the parish, the village or the market town are imagined by these nineteenth-century women writers as enabling their heroines to access unlimited and immediate forms of social power. As such, the parochial spaces of nineteenth-century women's writing can be read as significant spaces of action for the heroine and her author.

As will be shown, these images of the gentlewoman and the local community draw on the complex relationship between women and the nation throughout the nineteenth century. In *Borderline Citizens*, historian Kathryn Gleadle describes women's rich and highly variable experience of the political process during the years 1815-1867. Despite being denied access to the franchise, women of the middle and gentry classes were able to express and explore an interest in the political affairs of the nation via 'petitioning, publication, pressure groups, and patronage'. In conjunction with this multiplicity of options, the local community could also offer women a stage for their political identities. As the texts from this study (amongst others) reveal, some women oversaw the building and running of new schools and churches, while others campaigned for male relatives in local elections. Yet as Gleadle argues, even as women engaged in politics, their engagement was made fraught by their status as 'borderline citizens' – individuals neither wholly within nor apart from the British state. As such, female influence over politics – national and local - remained 'fragile and contingent'. Women 'might be conceptualised

³ See for example, Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation and the City*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late Victorian London*, (London: Virago Press, 1992; repr. 2000), and the chapter 'The Rape of the Glances' in Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

(and feel) integral to the political process at one moment - but this could quickly evaporate in the face of other cultural pressures'.⁴

Nonetheless, if history reveals the inherent instability of nineteenth-century women's status within the nation, women's fiction from the period illustrates a more empowered interpretation of their 'borderline citizenship' than might reasonably be expected. Indeed, novels such as Hannah More's *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* and Charlotte Yonge's *The Clever Woman of the Family* celebrate the feminine identities *and* the power of their heroines. The texts provide an assured image of the gentlewoman in her neighbourhood, as Lucilla Stanley and Rachel Keith both use maternal philanthropy to successfully intervene in the systems of their communities.⁵ Rather than cancelling each other out, feminine and political identities are depicted as intertwined by More and Yonge. This intertwining emphasises the significance of parochial space to nineteenth-century women writers' visions of female power and female citizenship. Indeed, as Gleadle asserts, parochial space granted women 'greater latitude to act as community figures, than they did in the public realm'. As the historian maintains, unlike wider public society, 'in their vicinities there were at least multiple possibilities for female authority, and the constellation of particular circumstances could produce significant opportunities for those with the talents and confidence to claim them' – and crucially, the heroines of More, Brontë, Gaskell, Yonge, Eliot and Ward all seemingly possess these talents and

⁴ Kathryn Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens: Women, Gender and Political Culture in Britain 1815-1867*, (Oxford: OUP, 2009), pp. 1-2. Although I have described women as denied access to the franchise, before 1832 it was *technically* possible for women who fulfilled certain property criteria to vote in elections. Only with the First Reform Act of 1832 was the English voter unequivocally declared to be male.

⁵ Hannah More, *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*; Charlotte Yonge, *The Clever Woman of the Family*, (London: Macmillan and Co., 1865; repr. Ontario: Broadview Press Ltd, 2001).

confidence in abundance.⁶ Hence while only *Middlemarch* and *Marcella* concern themselves explicitly with the impact of an election upon a local community, all of the texts of this study (which include novels and biographies) through their exploration of their heroines' philanthropy and involvement in the day-to-day running of their neighbourhoods, depict the gentlewoman as immersed in local politics and as an engaged and committed citizen.⁷

In discussing the philanthropic heroines of More, Brontë, Gaskell, Yonge, Eliot and Ward in terms of political and feminine identities, I am arguably widening the frame of reference provided by Gleadle's *Borderline Citizens*, since, as noted, only two of the novels of this study involve its women in issues of national government. I employ the concept of borderline citizenship in connection with the more general sense of female power explored by my women authors – a power to control the rhythms and structures of the local community and frequently equated with the notoriously slippery theory of 'woman's influence'. As the immense popularity of Sarah Stickney Ellis' *Women of England* conduct book series (1839-1843), as well as Sarah Lewis' *Woman's Mission* (1839) testify, the notion of female moral influence over the men of their lives due to women's inherent 'conscience and charity', certainly resonated with the early Victorians.⁸ This is not to say that women actually experienced the power of such influence in their day-to-day lives, but rather that the *idea* of woman as 'the regulating power of the great social machine' maintained an appeal for female readers. As Lewis urged women to have 'much to do with

⁶ Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens*, p. 18; p. 156.

⁷ George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, (London: Blackwood & Sons, 1871-2; repr. Oxford: OUP, 1998).

⁸ See Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Women of England* (1839), *The Daughters of England* (1842), *The Wives of England* (1843), *The Mothers of England* (1843), (London: Fisher, Son, & Co.) See also Sarah Lewis, *Woman's Mission*, 4th edn., (London: John W. Parker, 1839), p. 52.

politics' via their roles as 'moral agents' in the family, narratives that depict gentlewomen as influencing or leading their vicinity can thus be seen to offer a politicised view of women in their local sphere.⁹ While Muireann O'Cinneide asserts, 'It is not sufficient simply to agree that the social can be political: if everything is political then nothing is' the critic also recognises, 'Politics as a process can comprise the articulation and debate of communal values [and] the co-operation or conflict between individuals or groups seeking to advance their particular interests'.¹⁰ In working with their neighbours to care for the local poor, but also arguing with their rivals over their social values, the heroines of this study can thus be seen as urgently concerned with questions of politics and influence, even if the word politics, or the world of parliament are not invoked.

Crucially, women's position on the borders of the political state is frequently represented as not only suited to their roles as wives and mothers, but essential to the survival of the nation by the writers discussed here. To be on the borders is to be on the edge but is also to be in between. It is this in between status of the gentlewoman that is depicted as particularly vital, as the heroines Lucilla Stanley, Lady Ludlow and Dorothea Brooke act as influential mediators between rich and poor, as well as conservation and reform. Women's borderline citizenship thus enables the female author to imagine her heroine as at the centre of all community transactions. Nonetheless, simultaneous to this empowered

⁹ Lewis, p. 46; p. 52. The pleasure women readers derived from Stickney Ellis' and Lewis' particular brand of conduct literature can be seen in the teenage letters of George Eliot, who, on 17th September 1840 writes to her friend and former teacher Maria Lewis, 'By the bye do recommend to all your married friends "Woman's Mission" a 3.6d book and one you would like to read; the most philosophical and masterly on the subject I ever read or glanced over.' George Eliot, 'To Maria Lewis, 17th September 1840', in *The George Eliot Letters, Volume I 1836-1851*, ed. by Gordon S. Haight, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), pp. 65-67, (p. 66).

¹⁰ Muireann O'Cinneide, *Aristocratic Women and the Literary Nation, 1832-1867*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 1; p. 2.

vision of the gentlewoman in her vicinity, a sense of insecurity remains, which is in keeping with the image of female citizenship as fragile and inconsistent. As Lyn Pykett notes in her discussion of women's writing of the 1860s and 1890s, female writing is almost inevitably 'marked by the writers' specific experiences as women, and by the ways in which their biological femaleness is structured and mediated by socio-cultural concepts of femininity. To this extent these women writers will be seen to reinscribe their culture's stories about femininity.'¹¹

Hence even as the writers of my thesis celebrate female power, they also undermine it, as they reproduce society's narratives about gender and in particular, a concern about the legitimacy of female social power. A central theme of all of the texts of this study – with the exception of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* – is the tense relationship that the philanthropic heroine maintains with the local clergy, as both gentlewoman and clergyman battle it out for ultimate authority in the parish. These power contests reveal the true instability at the heart of the Victorian heroine's social influence.

My emphasis on the local and the rural in nineteenth-century women's writing seeks to complicate traditional fascinations with the relationship between Victorian women and urban space, as well as with the ideology of separate gendered spheres – famously the notion of a feminine domestic space and a masculine public arena. The publication of Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* in 1987 instigated the highly influential position this ideology of gendered space has maintained with feminist critics of the late twentieth century. For

¹¹ Lyn Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing*, (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 1992; repr. 2002), p. 5.

Davidoff and Hall, the period between 1780 and 1850 saw the emergence of capitalism and the middle classes as *the* dominant forces of nineteenth-century society. Closely connected with this emergence was the middle classes' division of the world into public and private spheres, as success in commercial enterprise was held to rest upon the sexual division of labour within the family. As Davidoff and Hall describe this division throughout their study of families from Birmingham, Essex and Suffolk, women are shown to be relegated to the private family home, whilst men made a name for themselves in the public sphere of commerce, formal societies, clubs and journalism. Recounting the story of James Luckcock, the Radical Birmingham jeweller, and his family, Davidoff and Hall illustrate how the idea of sexual difference operated on the ground level, as they describe Mrs. Luckcock's retirement from her husband's enterprise. This retirement into the home is depicted as a retirement into domestic obscurity, as the historians pointedly note that they do not know the name of James Luckcock's wife:

She had no visible public life, no portrait painted of her, none of her thoughts, ambitions and dreams have survived in her own words. [...] Equal in the eyes of Heaven they may have been. Equal in property and importance they certainly were not. As a married woman, Mrs. Luckcock had no rights to property and her life was spent in domestic obscurity. Her daughter was equally invisible to the public eye. Her son, Howard, however, followed in his father's footsteps, becoming a stalwart of Birmingham, a JP, a trustee of the Botanical and Horticultural Society, the chairman of the Fire Insurance Company – a veritable public man, a fit and proper person.¹²

¹² Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850*, (London: Hutchinson Education, 1987; repr. London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 17-18.

This description of the unknown Mrs. Luckcock reveals problems in Davidoff and Hall's analysis however, as they move from asserting her invisibility to the public eye – no portrait, no published writings – to making a case for total domestic obscurity. While Mrs. Luckcock may not have led the sort of life that left visible traces for the twentieth-century scholar to follow, this does not mean that her life was unknown or unseen by her contemporaries – her family, but also her wider kin network and neighbours. Yet according to Davidoff and Hall's frame of reference, the option for the middle classes during 1780-1850 was either life in the public sphere as 'a fit and proper person', or a life lived at home – obscure and invisible, and by extension, not a proper person. This binary does not leave room for nuance, nor is it helpful in considering spaces in the local community surrounding the family home such as neighbourhood streets, the church, or surrounding fields and footpaths. While Davidoff and Hall refer to the parish in their study, and note the range of communal activities within it, they do not demonstrate where this local space fits within their public and private spheres. This leaves the parish floating in a kind of no-man's land between the family home and 'the realm of life in which public opinion can be formed'.¹³ This passing over of the local and the communal is in spite of the importance attached to communal space by nineteenth-century women, as my study will show.

The translation of Jurgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962) into English in 1989 saw critics connect Habermas' theory with Davidoff and Hall's text. Like Davidoff and Hall, Habermas described the formation of a masculine

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 83; p. 419.

public sphere during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the simultaneous privatisation of the bourgeois family home, which he termed ‘the intimate sphere’. Again, as with Davidoff and Hall, Habermas regarded the separation of public and private spheres as driven by society’s ‘transformations toward capitalism’ and the emergence of the middle classes.¹⁴ Yet as Johanna Meehan and others have asserted in *Feminists Read Habermas: Gendering the Subject of Discourse*, Habermas’ image of the public sphere has many problems for feminist scholarship, not least its neglect of the role played by women in European society throughout the period.¹⁵ This neglect highlights one of the difficulties in thinking about gender and space in nineteenth-century England in terms of Habermas’ social structure. Hence while Davidoff and Hall’s arguments, as well as wider debates over separate gendered spheres are frequently considered in relation to Habermas’ theory, my study will not be plotted through Habermas’ concepts. Importantly, Habermas’ masculine public sphere can shed little light on representations of nineteenth-century gentlewomen in local, rural space.

The endurance of the separate spheres argument is in spite of Amanda Vickery’s highly critical essay ‘Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women’s History’, published in 1993 in *The Historical Journal*. Vickery notes the tendency of female historians to represent the typical woman of the nineteenth-century middle class as a ‘near

¹⁴ Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. by Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence, (Germany: Hermann Luchterhand Verlag, 1962; repr. and trans. London: Polity Press, 1989), p. 44.

¹⁵ Johanna Meehan (Ed.), *Feminists Read Habermas: Gendering the Subject of Discourse*, (London: Routledge, 1995). See in particular, Johanna Meehan, ‘Introduction’, pp. 1-20, and Joan B. Landes, ‘The Public and Private Sphere: A Feminist Reconsideration’, pp. 91-116.

prisoner in the home' and leading a 'sheltered life drained of economic purpose and public responsibility' - 'immured in the private sphere' until 'feminism released her'. Vickery also lambasts the continued connection of separate spheres with middle-class culture – 'It was separate gender spheres which allegedly put the middle in the middle-class' – before turning to critique *Family Fortunes* for proposing an argument incompatible with its historical sources and case studies.¹⁶ As with my concerns with the unexplained relationship between the parish and the seemingly separate sexual spheres of *Family Fortunes*, Vickery comments, 'the richness and singularity of the picture Davidoff and Hall reconstruct refuses the general structure they seek to impose. The picture still stands although the claims they make for it, in my opinion, do not.'¹⁷

Nevertheless, Vickery's criticism of the narrative of separate gendered spheres has in fact kept the structure of *two* social spheres intact, as subsequent critics have used the historian's work to reveal problems with separate spheres in specific instances, rather than dismantle the structure as whole. Building on Vickery's analysis, feminist literary critics in particular, have sought to reveal the fault lines in the separate spheres argument. Critics have demonstrated how certain female authors from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries crossed over from the world of domesticity into the public arena of print. They have also described how female authors used their works to infuse the values of the family home into the male public sphere. Thus in 2000, Anne Mellor argued that Hannah More contributed to the infiltration and final domination of 'the

¹⁶ Amanda Vickery, 'A Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History', *The Historical Journal*, 36, 2 (1993), pp. 383-414, (p. 387).

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 394.

discursive public sphere' with 'the values of the private sphere associated primarily with women'.¹⁸ Likewise, Dorice Williams Elliott in her 2002 study *The Angel out of the House: Philanthropy and Gender in Nineteenth-Century England* maintained that Victorian female philanthropists used 'the terms of domestic ideology' to enter the public sphere – transforming their philanthropy into something 'more businesslike, later more professionalised, and finally bureaucratised' even as they defended their public participation with the language of women's domestic identities as wives and mothers.¹⁹ This is not to say that Elliott and Mellor are incorrect in noting the existence of public and private space, as well as the numerous connections between these worlds in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. My issue is with both critics' division of society into only *two* realms, even as they recognise the fallacy of such division. Where do the spaces of the local and the communal fit into this division? Are they part of 'the values of the private sphere' that Mellor identifies? Or do they belong with the public world that Elliott sees numerous nineteenth-century women invading under the guise of philanthropy? Indeed, from Elliott's discussion of texts such as Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, Rhoda Broughton's *Not Wisely But Too Well*, and George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, it would appear that for the critic, the heroine's neighbourhood does form part of the public arena, and yet the known and local spaces described by *Middlemarch* hardly accord with the typical understanding of the public arena as the space of

¹⁸ Anne Mellor, *Mothers of the Nation: Women's Political Writing in England, 1780-1830*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000; repr. 2002), p. 11.

¹⁹ Dorice Williams Elliott, *The Angel out of the House: Philanthropy and Gender in Nineteenth-Century England*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), p. 11.

public opinion, commerce and national politics.²⁰ It is with these questions in mind that I now turn to Lyn H. Lofland's concept of the 'parochial sphere' explored in *The Public Realm: Exploring the City's Quintessential Social Territory*.

Significantly for this study, Lofland defines public space as *urban* space – it is 'the city's quintessential social territory' and is inhabited by 'persons who are strangers to one another or who "know" one another only in terms of occupational or other nonpersonal identity categories'. For Lofland, the public realm is incompatible with non-urban settlements such as a village or a small town, and maintains that in these spaces the 'characteristic form of social organisation in such settings is the community'. This means that,

when one leaves one's immediate personal or private space [...] one moves into a world of acquaintances, kin, friends, enemies, and so forth, with whom one shares a culture and a history. All relationships are primary and what is defined as appropriate behaviour among various categories of primary group members is as appropriate in private as in public space.²¹

Lofland's analysis of the social geographies of the village and the small town is crucial for nineteenth-century studies since for many individuals of the period, their lives and experiences were bound up in such non-urban settlements, despite our own emphasis today on the industrialising and urbanising nineteenth century. Gleadow's analysis of the 1851 census underlines the importance of rural life to the period, as the historian notes that 'only 50.1 per cent of the population

²⁰ Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, (London: Chapman and Hall, 1855; repr. Oxford: OUP, 2008); Rhoda Broughton, *Not Wisely But Too Well*, (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1867).

²¹ Lyn H. Lofland, *The Public Realm: Exploring the City's Quintessential Social Territory*, (New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction, 1998; repr. 2009), p. 9.

of England and Wales were residing in urban areas [...] and it should be remembered that the definition of urban was any population greater than 2,000'.²² Likewise, Gleadle supports the use of Lofland's arguments in relation to the nineteenth century, in particular Lofland's concept of the parochial realm, which Lofland employs in her discussion of the community spaces that define non-urban settlements:

To oversimplify a bit, the private realm is the world of the household and friend and kin networks; the parochial realm is the world of the neighbourhood, workplace, or acquaintance networks; and the public realm is the world of strangers and the "street". Through the lens of this trichotomy, we can see that tribes, villages, and small towns are composed simply of the private and parochial realms.²³

The concept of the parochial realm therefore transforms traditional understandings of nineteenth-century women's social geography. Gleadle maintains that 'women's public roles' were 'frequently conceived [...] differently in the parochial realm, where they had greater latitude to act as community figures, than they did in the public realm.' But the historian also notes that 'the distinction between the parochial and the public spheres [...] could be fluid or blurred, thus creating further ambiguity as to the nature of women's public role'.²⁴ Both the power that the parochial sphere granted to women, and the problematic nature of such power can be seen in the novels of this study. Hannah More confidently asserted the right of the gentlewoman to

²² Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens*, p. 124.

²³ Lofland, p. 10. Lofland is building on definitions of private, public and parochial found in Albert Hunter's 'Private, Parochial and Public Social Orders: The Problem of Crime and Incivility in Urban Communities', in *The Challenge of Social Control: Citizenship and Institution Building in Modern Society*, ed. by Gerald D. Suttles and Mayer N. Zald, (New Jersey: Ablex, 1985), pp. 230-42.

²⁴ Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens*, p. 18.

claim her surrounding community as her sphere of work and influence in *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* in 1808. Yet in the later years of the period, the heroines of Charlotte Yonge and Mrs. Humphry Ward are shown to be bored with their parochial influence and keen to translate it into real public power. Indeed, even in the earlier texts this potentially tense relationship between parochial and public is apparent, as writers such as More and Gaskell used the parochial spaces of their texts to represent the nation in its most traditional, rural sense – an idea that carries through to the novels of Mrs. Humphry Ward in the 1890s. Depicting women's philanthropic work in their communities could thus also invite questions about their role on a wider, national scale, even as the female authors remained committed to their parochial vision.

Philanthropy is therefore central to the role that the heroines of my study play in the communal spaces of their novels. In *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth Century England* F. K. Prochaska documents the explosion of charity work carried out by women throughout the period, as well as the increased variety of roles available for the Victorian female philanthropist by the end of the century from lady visitor, to 'saver' of prostitutes, to a worker for the Charity Organisation Society.²⁵ Writers throughout the period – not just the authors included in this study - drew upon the phenomenon of female philanthropy in their novels. Thus we have Becky Sharp at the end of *Vanity Fair* busying herself in 'works of piety' with her name in 'all the Charity Lists', Mrs. Jellyby in *Bleak House* with her 'telescopic philanthropy' for the African colony of Borrioboola-Gha, Miss Clack in *The Moonstone* and her work for 'the Mothers'-Small-

²⁵ F. K. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth Century England*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

Clothes-Conversion-Society', as well as Miss Lant and her soup kitchen in George Gissing's *The Nether World*.²⁶ Notably, these examples from male novelists of the period support the general historical trend noted by Prochaska for women to involve themselves with philanthropic associations and charity bureaucracy as the nineteenth-century progressed (such bodies included The Bible Society, the London City Mission and the Workhouse Visiting Society).²⁷ By way of contrast however, the women writers of this study demonstrate less enthusiasm for the world of associational charity, and instead represent their heroines as performing individual acts of philanthropy in their novels – usually local visiting – in spaces that are rural or provincial in nature. One reason for this distinction could well be the use of women's associational work as a target of satire by the male novelists. While men authors mocked the modern trend of female bureaucratic charity, women writers turned to the longstanding practice of female visiting. By representing this seemingly antiquated form of female philanthropy, women writers were in fact able to imagine and explore the nature of female social power. One of the central tenets of this thesis is that as the communal relations of the parochial realm granted women greater authority to lead their communities, imagining local, non-urban spaces enabled nineteenth-century female authors to depict a more empowered vision of women's social role that emphasised women's strength as leaders of their parishes.

²⁶ William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1848; repr. London: Penguin Classics, 2003), p. 808; Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1853; repr. London: Penguin Classics, 1996), p. 56; Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone*, (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1868; repr. London: Penguin Classics, 1986), p. 237; and George Gissing, *The Nether World*, (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1889; repr. Oxford: OUP, 1992).

²⁷ Prochaska, pp. 29-30.

Crucially, and unlike the literary critic Rosemarie Bodenheimer, I regard the power of the nineteenth-century philanthropic heroine as maternal in its inspiration, and not paternal.²⁸ While all of the novels of this study depict their female philanthropists as towards the top of their communities' social hierarchies, the roles these characters play build upon traditional ideas concerning women's essentially maternal characteristics of care, sympathy and nurture, as well as on the close, emotional relationships the heroines are seen to naturally maintain with their neighbours. This emphasis and elevation of women's maternity can be traced in texts throughout the nineteenth century, including Sarah Lewis' *Woman's Mission* (1839) and John Ruskin's 'Of Queens' Gardens' (1865), but also, and importantly for my thesis, back to the works of the Evangelical moralist Hannah More, which will be discussed in greater depth below.²⁹ Significantly, the texts of this study frequently represent male characters as distant members of the local community, or even absent altogether. Men are often preoccupied with non-local concerns such as the state of the Church of England in More's *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*, national economics and the Napoleonic Wars in Brontë's *Shirley*, the army in Yonge's *The Clever Woman of the Family*, and national elections in Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Ward's *Marcella* (men are essentially absent in Gaskell's *My Lady Ludlow*, apart from the 'feminine' clergyman Mr. Gray).³⁰ Indeed, the maternal philanthropy of these novels' female characters is often set against the patriarchal or paternal values of their male acquaintances. This contrast is notable in *My Lady Ludlow*, as its

²⁸ See Rosemarie Bodenheimer's theory on 'the romance of the female paternalist' in *The Politics of Story in Victorian Fiction*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 21.

²⁹ John Ruskin, 'Of Queens' Gardens', in *Sesame and Lilies*, John Ruskin, (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1865; repr. New York: Cosimo, 2006), pp. 101-42.

³⁰ Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley*, (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1849; repr. London: Penguin, 2006).

eponymous heroine learns to abandon the patriarchal principles of her dead husband in favour of taking a more maternal, nurturing view of her local community.

The women of these novels work, or learn to work, within their communities. Although most of the texts are informed by a contest between the heroine and a rival for the power to direct their neighbours, there is little sense of embattled individualism, as the writers promote arguments for reform from inside the communal sphere, not against it. This refusal of dramatic social change expressed by the novels studied here has seen all of the writers at some point accused of conservatism and/or anti-feminism by critics.³¹ Yet these same female authors have also been celebrated for their ‘subversive’ politics and their feminism.³² This paradox reflects how many of the writers of my thesis trouble modern day categories, such as ‘feminist’ and ‘progressive’. A writer like Charlotte Yonge, for example, who created intelligent, active heroines but who also believed wholeheartedly in the inferiority of women, confuses those readers intent on placing her on one side or the other of the feminist/anti-feminist demarcation. The gender tensions found in Yonge’s writing can be used to support arguments for more than one definition of feminism, but also, as I am doing in this study, can be used to make the case for abandoning the term altogether when considering Victorian women writers.

³¹ See Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace in *Their Fathers’ Daughters: Hannah More, Maria Edgeworth, and Patriarchal Complicity*, (Oxford: OUP, 1991), and also Valerie Sanders’ *Eve’s Renegades: Victorian Anti-Feminist Women Novelists*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1996).

³² For example, see Dorothea Barrett, *Vocation and Desire: George Eliot’s Heroines*, (London: Routledge, 1989; repr. 1991), p. 130; and Beth Sutton-Ramspeck, *Raising the Dust: The Literary Housekeeping of Mary Ward, Sarah Grant, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004), p. 14.

Rather than regarding the writers of my thesis as caught between feminism or anti-feminism, I underline their desire for gradual social reform and their wish to preserve tradition and community. I employ the terms ‘conservative reform’ and ‘reforming conservatism’ throughout my thesis in order to encapsulate these mutual, linked desires of my women writers, who imagine social change as organic and gradual in nature, and growing out of the communities it will transform. Crucially, women are closely connected with the visions of conservative reform in all of the texts I discuss, which returns us back to ideas concerning maternal philanthropy and the parochial sphere. The maternalism of the heroines and their authors is presented as perfectly suited to the local politics of conservative reform, as the figure of the mother symbolises the generation of new life, but also its continuation, preservation, and nurture. Likewise, the parochial realm also symbolises this doubleness, as it functions as the middle ground between the private, intimate values of the family home and the constantly changing worlds of politics, commerce and public opinion. The borderline position of women in nineteenth-century civic society can thus be seen to be replicated and empowered by the woman writer, as she imagines her heroine in the parochial sphere advocating a maternalist set of ideas that endorse her position in the middle ground and argue for the value of being in between.

As I have already suggested, both the writings and philanthropic career of Hannah More are vital to female authors’ images of the philanthropic heroine and her parochial sphere throughout the nineteenth century. It is due to the significance of More’s image for subsequent generations of women writers that I have analysed Henry Thompson’s 1838 biography of Hannah More alongside my studies of the nineteenth-century female author, as the hagiography

surrounding More after her death in 1833 is essential to understanding Victorian constructions of the female philanthropist, just as much as More's own works.³³ Hannah More has been described as 'probably the most influential woman of her day' by Prochaska in his history of female philanthropy, and numerous literary critics have noted the significance of Hannah More to her Victorian successors, including Catherine Gallagher in *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*, Kathryn Sutherland in 'Hannah More's Counter-Revolutionary Feminism' and Dorice Williams Elliott in *The Angel Out of the House: Philanthropy and Gender in Nineteenth-Century England*.³⁴ Due to the unprecedented commercial success of More's diverse range of writings, which comprised poetry, tracts for the poor and conduct books both for women and for the upper classes, but also her fame as the instigator of Sunday school education in Somerset, Hannah More exerted a powerful force over the morals of eighteenth and early nineteenth century society. Although other female contemporaries also carried out charitable works, arguably it was More who popularised philanthropy as a vocation for middle- and upper-class women, as she writ large the influence women could achieve in their communities, as well as (less intentionally) in the world of literature. More, with her campaigns for moral reform in the upper classes, but also her counselling against revolution in tracts for the poor like 'Village Politics' (1793), was an important proponent of female conservative reform during an era overshadowed by the French Revolution and the

³³ Henry Thompson, *The Life of Hannah More: with Notices of her Sisters*, (London: T. Cadell, 1838).

³⁴ Prochaska, p. 6; Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction, 1832-1867*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Kathryn Sutherland, 'Hannah More's Counter-Revolutionary Feminism', in *Revolution in Writing: British Literary Responses to the French Revolution*, ed. by Kelvin Everest, (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), pp. 27-63.

Napoleonic Wars.³⁵ For Kathryn Sutherland, this conservative reform of More can be described as her ‘counter-revolutionary feminism’. While I question Sutherland’s depiction of More as feminist, the essay draws out the mutually conservative and reforming impulses of More’s writing, as well as stresses the significance of these impulses to the emergence of a nineteenth-century women’s literary tradition. Comparing Hannah More’s *Cheap Repository Tracts* to Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Sutherland notes,

There are two not incompatible ways of interpreting the propaganda war which More conducted with such huge success throughout the 1790s. More’s might be heard as the reactive voice of conservatism working to quell pro-French sympathies in the masses and to replace a diet of political subversion with a more frugal, and to the government, a more wholesome fare. But equally, and more effectively than Wollstonecraft’s purloined masculine enlightenment prose, More provides a whole battery of women-directed discourses, proposing a practical politics of domestic reformation, which is national in the ambitious scope of its campaign and personal in its focus on the woman in her family as the source of this larger regeneration.³⁶

Sutherland explicitly positions Brontë, Gaskell and Eliot as the successors to More’s counter-revolutionary feminism, as the critic maintains that these authors may be more appropriately ‘read as containing and dissipating subversion than as fuelling it’.³⁷ It is also notable however, that Hannah More maintained a direct connection with some of the women writers of this study. More was one of the patrons of the Clergy Daughters’ School at Cowan Bridge so infamously attended by the Brontë girls in the years 1824-1825, but she was

³⁵ Hannah More, ‘Village Politics, Addressed to all the Mechanics, Journeymen and Day Labourers in Great Britain, by Will Chip, A Country Carpenter’, (London: F. & C. Rivington, 1793).

³⁶ Kathryn Sutherland, pp. 35-36. See Hannah More, *Cheap Repository Tracts*, (London: John Marshall, 1795-1798); Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, (London: J. Johnson 1792; repr. London: Penguin, 2004).

³⁷ Kathryn Sutherland, p. 33.

also an idol to the Evangelical Mary Ann Evans in 1838, as well as a heroine of a different sort to Charlotte Yonge, who wrote two biographies and one work of fiction based upon the life of Hannah More in the years 1865, 1888 and 1890 respectively.³⁸ These connections demonstrate the far-reaching influence of Hannah More over the lives of women throughout the nineteenth century. In thus relating More's vision of conservative reform to a selection of Victorian women writers I am challenging Anne Mellor's insistence on a stark divide between the worlds of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For Mellor, More's maternal heroines lost their power in the Victorian era, being 'rewritten as the Angel in the House, a woman whose moral and intellectual roles were entirely confined to the private household'.³⁹ As will be shown, this vision of the Victorian woman's domestic imprisonment has little relevance to the novels of my thesis, which uphold and develop More's arguments for parochial female influence throughout the period.

Similarly, my thesis also offers a different trajectory to the 'Women's Movement' than that provided by Ray Strachey's still influential *The Cause: A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain* (1928), which links the philanthropy of More to the late-Victorian and Edwardian campaigns for female suffrage in complete disregard of More's own socially conservative politics.⁴⁰ As my study aims to show, women's celebratory representations of female

³⁸ George Eliot's idolisation of Hannah More can be seen in her letter to Maria Lewis: 'I have highly enjoyed Hannah More's letters; the contemplation of so blessed a character as hers is very salutary', 'To Maria Lewis, 18th August 1838', *The George Eliot Letters, Vol. I*, pp. 5-8, (p. 7). See Charlotte Yonge, 'Hannah More', *Biographies of Good Women (Second Series)*, (London: J. and C. Mozley, 1865), pp. 290-326; *Hannah More*, (London: W. H. Allen, 1888), and *The Cunning Woman's Grandson: A Tale of Cheddar A Hundred Years Ago*, (London: National Society's Depository, 1890).

³⁹ Mellor, p. 144.

⁴⁰ Ray Strachey, *The Cause: A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain*, (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1928; repr. London: Virago Press, 1989).

philanthropy did not guarantee their support for the vote – far from it. I have been inspired by Julia Bush's *Women Against the Vote* (2007), which in its examination of women's campaigns against female suffrage during the years 1889-1918, seriously considers a group of women who have hitherto been either ridiculed or totally neglected. In a similar vein to Bush, I have approached the conservative yet reforming politics of my women writers with respect. I have sought to avoid validating the novels of my study by lauding an apparent relationship with either modern-day feminism or the female suffrage movement of their time.⁴¹

Hence although women's experiences of their community may have vastly differed from the accounts offered by the female authors of this study, my concern is with how women *imagined* the relationship between their heroines and the parochial realm. Class is central to the novels for this very reason, as the authors frequently employ an aristocratic 'Lady Bountiful' style figure for their heroines in order to both underline and explain their characters' powerful position in their vicinity. It is notable that while all of the authors of this study originate from families with professional backgrounds (except for George Eliot, whose father was a farmer and manager of the local estate), their philanthropic heroines are either out-and-out aristocrats like Lady Ludlow and Marcella Boyce (later Lady Maxwell) or members of the landed gentry like Lucilla Stanley, Shirley Keeldar, Rachel Curtis and Dorothea Brooke – the one exception is the gentlewoman Caroline Helstone, who is still the vicar's niece and the daughter of an (albeit disgraced) 'fine gentleman'.⁴² This disparity between the backgrounds

⁴¹ Julia Bush, *Women Against the Vote: Female Anti-Suffragism in Britain*, (Oxford: OUP, 2007).

⁴² Brontë, *Shirley*, p. 408.

of the authors and their heroines calls attention to the huge social power of the aristocracy and the landed gentry throughout the nineteenth-century, even after the changes to parliamentary democracy signaled by the reform acts of 1832 and 1867. As Muireann O’Cinneide notes in her work on aristocratic women and literature during the inter-reform years, even in ‘1865, 44 per cent of MPs were still landed proprietors and/or aristocrats’, and the upper-class female via ‘ballrooms, dinners and house parties’, as well as landed estates had vital access to these figures of political power. Indeed, O’Cinneide marks out the landed estate and the rural community as especially significant political spaces for upper-class women, which again indicates the sort of parochial power envisaged by the authors of this study when depicting their landed philanthropic heroines:

As hostesses, negotiators, communicators, dispensers of patronage, and canvassers, aristocratic women had essential roles to play. If the politics of deference still influenced post-Reform voting, then the wives and daughters of country estates, on whom fell most of the regular contact with the local community, still had an important role to play in consolidating and invoking this deference.⁴³

Likewise, Gleadle maintains the greater importance of ‘social status and educational privilege’ than gender for determining power in the communal sphere.⁴⁴ For this reason, I use the term ‘gentlewoman’ in reference to the philanthropic heroines of my thesis, as like Amanda Vickery in *The Gentleman’s Daughter: Women’s Lives in Georgian England*, I believe ‘gentlewoman’ connotes something more of the landed background and privilege that the authors were gesturing to in having their powerful female characters belong to worlds so

⁴³ O’Cinneide, p. 154.

⁴⁴ Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens*, p. 18.

far removed from their own day-to-day lives.⁴⁵ This is of course, despite the fact that the women writers of this study were mainly presenting their visions of empowered female philanthropy to readers of the middle classes, which again highlights the imaginary, fantasy aspect to the parochial model of female influence found in nineteenth-century women's writing.

I examine novels alongside examples of life writing in order to trace constructions of the philanthropic heroine and the communal sphere. My critical sources are drawn from both historical and literary studies, but particularly recent histories that have emphasised the fluidity and the complexity of women's involvement in politics throughout the nineteenth century, as well as those that have stressed the importance of rural and local communities to nineteenth-century female life. In offering my literary contribution to the historical studies, I hope to draw greater attention to the parochial spaces of nineteenth-century women's writing, which are neither fully public nor private. I voice the suggestion that it is these imagined parochial spaces that enabled the expression of social arguments that were both maternal and conservatively reformist in nature.

In my first chapter I demonstrate the significance of Hannah More to narratives about women, philanthropy and the local community by analysing More's bestselling novel *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*, as well as the first full-length Victorian biography of More, *The Life of Hannah More, with notices of her sisters* by the curate Henry Thompson. These two texts reveal the potential power of the philanthropic woman in her community, but simultaneously imply

⁴⁵ For Vickery's analysis of the term 'gentlewoman' see *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 13-14.

the contested nature of this power. Although *Coelebs* only hints at such problems, Thompson's biography describes Hannah More's battles with the local clergy, which draw out the public and local politics of More's philanthropy, and reveal a far more 'borderline' depiction of the female philanthropist than her own writing would suggest. Chapter Two builds on this tense understanding of the female philanthropist's position in her community, as I analyse the questions raised by Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, and Elizabeth Gaskell's 1857 biography *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* and 1859 novella *My Lady Ludlow*.⁴⁶ Both writers attempt to imagine an empowered philanthropic heroine along the lines of Hannah More ruling their neighbourhoods. Yet it is *My Lady Ludlow* with its widowed, aristocratic heroine that most successfully presents an image of local female power, as Gaskell counters the pessimism of her friend's *Shirley*, as well as her own anxieties about maternal philanthropy and single women implied in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*.

By way of contrast, Chapter Three offers a more positive image of the philanthropic heroine in her community. Examining two novels that have been criticised for their anti-feminist plots – Charlotte Yonge's *The Clever Woman of the Family* and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* – I instead emphasise the power afforded to the philanthropic heroine, who has only to be taught how to most appropriately use it. Although there are new tensions between parochial and public realms in these novels, which reflect the growing organisation of the woman's movement from this point onwards, both Yonge and Eliot remain committed to the parochial sphere throughout their novels, which they expand in

⁴⁶ Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1857; repr. Oxford: OUP, 2001).

different directions for their heroines at their conclusions. Lastly, Chapter Four examines the writings of the prominent anti-suffrage campaigner and bestselling novelist Mrs. Humphry Ward. This chapter illustrates how narratives surrounding women's role in the parochial sphere retained their potency well into the 1890s, as Ward seeks to reinvigorate Hannah More's ideas of maternal philanthropy, the landed estate and conservative reform for the 'New Woman' generation. Nevertheless, the growing tension between public and parochial space implied in the works of Yonge and Eliot also endures in Ward's writing. Ward can be seen to struggle to maintain the attractions of the communal sphere for her ambitious, modern heroine Marcella Boyce when compared with the glamour of the role of the political woman.

Read together, these texts articulate the borderline position of women in nineteenth-century society, as the writers depict their heroines as simultaneously empowered and challenged within their local communities. Thus while the parochial spaces of these women's narratives increasingly come under threat from the public spheres of Victorian England, the philanthropic heroine in her parish remains a meaningful image of female social power to women authors and their readers throughout the nineteenth century.

Chapter One

‘We consider our own parish as our more appropriate field of action’:

The Parochial Philanthropy of Hannah More

The female philanthropist and Evangelical polymath Hannah More (1745-1833) has been described as both ‘The First Victorian’ and ‘probably the most influential woman of her day’.¹ This influence can be traced back to the vast outpourings from More’s pen throughout her lifetime, as she sought to instigate a reformation of manners that encompassed all areas of society. More’s works, which include the female conduct book-cum-educational treatise *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799) and the novel *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* (1808) were both highly popular and widely read – her most recent biographer Anne Stott claims, ‘In her time she was better known than Mary Wollstonecraft, and her books outsold Jane Austen’s many times over.’²

Hannah More’s *Cheap Repository Tracts* (1795-1798) were written for the increasingly literate labouring classes of the late eighteenth century and aimed to encourage the poor into habits of cleanliness and frugality, as well as to accommodate them with their lot in life during a time of social discontent and revolutionary fervour abroad. Yet while the *Tracts* focus on the lives of the poor, More also used these texts to underline the social responsibilities of the middle and upper classes for the care of their working-class neighbours. The fact that annual collected volumes, as well as octavo booklets of the *Tracts* were brought

¹ Anne Stott, *Hannah More: The First Victorian*, (Oxford: OUP, 2003; repr. 2007); Prochaska, p. 6.

² Stott, p. vii. See Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education, with a view of the principles and conduct prevalent among women of rank and fortune*, (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1799).

out in 1796 in order to cater to ‘gentry and middle-class demand for more durable editions’ of More’s tales demonstrates the receptivity of the middle and upper classes to the philanthropist’s vision of society.³

This message of duty and responsibility is central to all of More’s writing, and with it, More articulates a specific and unique role for women in maintaining social cohesion. Emphasising the special, moral characteristics of womanhood, More created such exemplary philanthropic female characters as Mrs. Jones in ‘The Cottage Cook’ and ‘The Sunday School’ (*Cheap Repository Tracts* 1797) and the saintly Lucilla Stanley in *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*.⁴ These figures, through their maternal care and guidance of the poor in their community, offer a viable vocation for gentlewomen that also brings them into contact with concerns of wider society. The illustration of a philanthropic calling for women was further substantiated by More’s own numerous – and famous – charitable activities during her lifetime, including the establishment of Sunday schools in the Mendips area of Somerset, the running of female benefit clubs, and supporting William Wilberforce’s campaigns against the British slave trade. Hannah More was thus crucial to the understanding and depiction of the female philanthropist in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and for ‘a generation or so after her death’ she remained widely read.⁵

Although More died four years before Victoria’s reign, she is depicted in Stott’s biography as ‘one of the midwives of the new age’.⁶ The argument for the

³ Stott, p. 176. Original versions of the *Tracts* were sold either as cheap chapbooks or broadsides – forms of publication traditionally targeted at the poor.

⁴ More, ‘The Cottage Cook’ and ‘The Sunday School’, *Cheap Repository Tracts* (London: John Marshall, 1797).

⁵ Stott, p. vii.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 336.

importance of More to the Victorians and in particular, their understanding of middle and upper-class womanhood, is borne out by the continued publication of collected works by the philanthropist throughout the nineteenth-century. These collected works are accompanied by numerous editions of *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*, which date up to 1879. Likewise, there also remained a steady market for biographies of Hannah More throughout the Victorian era, who appeared both as a figure in collective ‘Eminent Women’ or ‘Noble Women’ series, but also as the subject of individual studies such as Anna J. Buckland’s *Life of Hannah More: A Lady of Two Centuries* (1882) and the novelist Charlotte Mary Yonge’s *Hannah More* (1888).⁷

More’s relationship with the Victorians can be traced in her commitment to Evangelical Anglicanism, which became one of the main religious movements of the nineteenth century, as well as her seeming support in her writings for separate gendered spheres of action for men and women. However, this apparent support did not mean that More’s representations of female philanthropy were solely located in the domestic sphere. Rather, both More’s literary and lived versions of charity were defined by a belief in conservative reform that was at once empowering and contradictory in its vision of gradual social improvement that simultaneously preserved community structures and traditions. Women – due to their ability to generate new life but also nurture the lives of those already in existence – were central to More’s conservative reforming project. Notably it

⁷ Anna J. Buckland, *Life of Hannah More: A Lady of Two Centuries*, (London: Religious Tract Society, 1882); Charlotte Yonge, *Hannah More*. To see the prevalence of Hannah More in nineteenth-century collective biographies of women consult Alison Booth, *How to Make it as a Woman: Collective Biographical History from Victoria to the Present*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

was the parochial sphere around the home that More saw as the most fitting arena for this female work.

Whereas Anne Mellor, Kathryn Sutherland and Mitzi Myers have all correctly identified the connections between public and private spheres within both Hannah More's writing and philanthropy, the parochial spaces of More's work are more often neglected, or slotted into the either/or definition of 'domestic' or 'public'.⁸ Nevertheless, More's texts are littered with spaces that can neither be defined as belonging to the home, nor to the world of commerce or politics, but rather as connected to Lyn H. Lofland's concept of the 'parochial realm': 'the world of the neighbourhood, workplace, or acquaintance networks' that is 'characterised by a sense of community'.⁹ Indeed, while the statement of the character Mrs. Stanley that '*Charity is the calling of a lady; the care of the poor is her profession*' (More's italics) is frequently extracted from *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* to indicate the double, public message within More's philanthropy, critics usually fail to acknowledge the rest of Mrs. Stanley's argument, which identifies the most 'appropriate' arena for this female 'profession': 'We consider our own parish as our more appropriate field of action, where Providence, by "fixing the bounds of our habitation," seems to have made us peculiarly responsible for the comfort of those whom he has doubtless placed around us for that purpose.'¹⁰ In naming the parish as the 'field of action' for a 'lady', Mrs. Stanley – and by extension, Hannah More – adheres

⁸ See Mellor, *Mothers of the Nation*, Kathryn Sutherland, 'Hannah More's Counter-Revolutionary Feminism', and Mitzi Myers, 'Hannah More's Tracts for the Times: Social Fiction and Female Ideology', in *Fetter'd or Free? British Women Novelists, 1670-1815*, ed. by Mary Anne Schofield and Cecilia Macheski, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1986), pp. 264-84.

⁹ Lofland, p. 10.

¹⁰ More, *Coelebs*, pp. 228-29.

to Kathryn Gleadle's reading of the nineteenth-century parochial sphere as granting women 'greater latitude to act as community figures'.¹¹ The power of landed women in the community sphere thus calls for a re-nuancing of arguments surrounding Hannah More's philanthropy and *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*, as the significance of the parochial sphere and especially the parish space to More's depictions of women, charity and influence leads us back to her conservative yet reforming message for society.

This chapter examines the significance of Hannah More's representation of female philanthropy via two texts of the early nineteenth century: More's own novel *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* and the first full-length biography of More by the Anglican curate Henry Thompson *The Life of Hannah More: with notices of her sisters*.¹² In *Coelebs*, More can be seen to articulate her vision of the role to be played by women in a conservative reform of early nineteenth-century society. This vision positions philanthropic and domestic activities as special forms of female power, which More characterises as maternal and contrasts with more traditional paternalist charity that she frequently figures solely in the terms of financial donation. In *Coelebs*, it is maternal influence that can regenerate the public sphere via the relationships women nurture in the space of the parish. This regenerative aspect renders female philanthropy a political act in More's novel, even whilst located in a local, rural setting.

Published thirty years after *Coelebs* and five years after More's death, Thompson's biography *The Life of Hannah More* also interacts with this

¹¹ Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens*, p. 18.

¹² Although William Roberts' *Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Hannah More*, 4 vols., (London: R. B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 1834) was published in 1834, much of the work's four volumes are given over to reproductions of More's letters, as opposed to biographical narrative.

reforming conservative model of female philanthropy established by More, albeit more unwillingly. As Thompson seeks to repackage Hannah More for his early Victorian readers, the Evangelical curate-cum-biographer distances his subject from her political identity – by downplaying More’s involvement in the campaigns against the slave trade, but also by suppressing the political aspect of More’s charitable work in the parochial spaces around her home in Somerset. In *The Life of Hannah More*, the power and influence that More exercised in the parishes of the Mendips is neutralised and domesticated. While Thompson is keen to situate More in a rural setting, he is also keen – as the curate of More’s local church in Wrington – to re-imagine her role in the parish as more submissive to the orders of the clergy, when in fact this was frequently far from the case. Thus a power contest emerges in *The Life of Hannah More* between curate and female philanthropist over control of the parish, as More’s mutually reformist and conservative definition of her place in the community persistently challenges and disrupts Thompson’s boundaries. This contest indicates the inherent tensions within More’s vision of a conservatively reforming womanhood, as a form of social influence that is particularly vulnerable to male attack – what Gleadle has typified as women’s borderline experience of citizenship during the nineteenth century.

Hannah More

Coelebs in Search of a Wife (1808)

It may seem strange to maintain that Miss Hannah More and Mrs. Trimmer and the other good ladies who started the Sunday School and cottage-visiting fashions were the founders of a movement which would

have shocked them so profoundly; but clearly it is true. When Hannah More and her sisters began personally to teach the wild children of the Cheddar Hills they opened up a new field of activity for women. It is true that their educational ambitions were extremely limited. Their main object seemed to be to teach people to be contented with their lot, and, as Hannah More said, 'I allow of no writing for the poor!' But all the same, the fact that she was teaching anything at all was a highly revolutionary matter. Without in the least intending to do so, she was marking out a new sphere for the young women of the middle classes, and their revolt against their narrow and futile lives followed as a matter of course. Once they began to look outside their drawing rooms, and to see the hard realities which other people had to face, those of them who were intelligent and energetic (and these were more numerous than was generally believed) were bound to revolt against their own ornamental futility. For a little while philanthropy and soup and blankets kept them quiet, but not for long.¹³

So goes Ray Strachey's analysis of Hannah More and female philanthropy in her 1928 history of the women's movement *The Cause*. However, rather than revealing much about More's connections with the nineteenth-century 'Woman Question', Strachey's patronising stance towards More and her philanthropy exposes the teleological thrust of *The Cause*, as Strachey – writing in the year of universal suffrage and ten years after the female vote was first won - presents women's history solely through the lens of the female suffrage issue. Strachey's emphasis on women's voting rights inevitably positions more conservative figures like Hannah More outside of the feminist narrative, despite the fact that, as Julia Bush argues, for many women engaged in public reform throughout the nineteenth century, winning the vote was often either a side issue, or antithetical to their own political views.¹⁴ Moreover, Strachey's disregard for the 'narrow and futile' lives led by women in the domestic sphere, as well as for the 'soup and blankets' of their philanthropic work betrays, as Amanda Vickery has noted,

¹³ Strachey, pp. 13-14.

¹⁴ Bush, pp. 3-5.

the anti-domestic bias of *The Cause*. This bias has significantly impacted upon feminist history and literary criticism of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and can be seen in Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace's 1991 book *Their Fathers' Daughters: Hannah More, Maria Edgeworth and Patriarchal Complicity*. More is described by Kowaleski-Wallace as an 'uninvited' guest to feminist scholarship who makes 'the process of celebrating our heritage as women more difficult'.¹⁵ Strachey's assessment of More has thus maintained considerable influence over our understanding of Hannah More and her relationship with an English feminist tradition, but also over nineteenth-century womanhood itself. Arguably, *The Cause* has encouraged a view of Victorian women as 'incarcerated in a separate private sphere' that later served 'as a pressure cooker' for 'mass female politics', despite the existence of evidence that revealed a more complex relationship between nineteenth-century women and space.¹⁶ Anti-domestic arguments found in scholarship on the nineteenth century ignore the political implications of the home itself. Also, and crucially for this study, these arguments neglect the importance of the parochial sphere to women's lives, as well as to women's writing, throughout the period.

Strachey's reading of the legacy of More's philanthropy is challenged by More's own conduct book-cum-novel *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*. While Strachey asserts in her discussion of Sunday schools that, 'Without in the least intending to do so, [More] was marking out a new sphere for the young women of the middle classes', this idea that More was *ignorant* of the implications of her philanthropy for other women is refuted by *Coelebs*, which stridently and

¹⁵ Kowaleski-Wallace, p. 5.

¹⁶ Vickery, 'A Golden Age to Separate Spheres?', p. 388.

explicitly calls for middle and upper-class women to regard charity as their true profession and claim the parish as the field of their work.¹⁷ In Strachey's sweeping narrative of increasing female empowerment, the philanthropy offered by women like More figures as a transitional moment – an act of placation to intelligent and energised women that was soon rejected in place of positions far more important than the giving of soup and blankets. This casual passing over of female philanthropy neglects its complex association with the 'Woman Question' and women's movements of the nineteenth century, as well as downplays philanthropy's significance in the lives of gentlewomen for the way it created a vocational space for them within their local communities, which many remained committed to throughout their lifetimes. In *Coelebs*, More emphasises how female charitable activity effects this transformation of local, domestic settings into arenas of national importance, as women's moral influence and care for the poor is represented as vital to the health and principles of the nation. Written during a period of war and social unrest, in More's novel it is the gentlewoman who is at the centre of her community and essential for the upholding of society's cohesion and the creation of positive inter-class relationships.

As I have indicated in the introduction, my argument for the importance of *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* to Victorian representations of female philanthropy responds to Anne Mellor's *Mothers of the Nation: Women's Political Writing in England 1780-1830*, as well as Kathryn Sutherland's essay 'Hannah More's Counter-Revolutionary Feminism'. The two critics' insistence on the lack of distinction between the public and private spheres in More's writing suggests how female philanthropy can appear as both domestic and

¹⁷ Strachey, pp. 13-14; More, *Coelebs*, p. 228.

political in *Coelebs*, especially when much scholarship – typified by Davidoff and Hall’s *Family Fortunes* - remains committed to reading the private and the public as distinct gendered spaces during this period. Challenging this ideology in *Mothers of the Nation* Mellor asserts,

It may be time to discard this binary, overly simplistic concept of separate sexual spheres altogether in favour of a more nuanced and flexible conceptual paradigm that foregrounds the complex intersection of class, religious, racial, and gender differences in this historical period.¹⁸

Starting with Mellor’s argument, I have emphasised the significance of social status to women’s representations of gender during the nineteenth century, but I have also moved away from establishing connections between public and private spaces to examining the role played by women of status in the community sphere – an area neglected by Mellor. I agree with Mellor in regarding the role More offered for gentlewomen in her writings as bound up with a maternalist ideology that insisted on the moral power of woman through her nurture ‘not just of her own family, but of the nation as a whole’. Yet crucially, I differ from Mellor in thinking that this tradition of maternal empowerment died out with the advent of the Victorian age and the arrival ‘the Angel in the House, a woman whose moral and intellectual roles were entirely confined to the private household’ – and this reading of Victorian domesticity will be interrogated later.¹⁹

¹⁸ Mellor, p. 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 29-30; p. 144. Mellor’s reading of More’s relationship with maternal figures also seeks to critique the claims made by Kowaleski-Wallace of More’s ‘matrophobia’. See Kowaleski-Wallace, p. 40.

Thus although More's depiction of female philanthropy in *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* is a socially conservative one for the way in which it preserves existing class structures through feminine involvement in wider society, More's insistence on the importance of women to their local communities is rooted in her desire to reform the social sphere. This dual adherence to ideas of conservation and reform is at the heart of More's belief in the 'natural', maternal influence of the gentlewoman, and in her urging of female philanthropy as a legitimate vocation throughout her novel. In making this argument, I am thus challenging Kowaleski-Wallace's deterministic view of the maternalist philanthropy practiced and depicted by More as 'limited by a discourse insisting upon persistent cultural stereotypes for female behaviour'. For Kowaleski-Wallace, these stereotypes are drawn from More's own strand of Protestantism: Evangelical Anglicanism. In her discussion of More's philanthropy, Kowaleski-Wallace asserts that her maternal charity unavoidably and inevitably gratifies 'the purposes of the Evangelical fathers', as More's 'maternal work serves a larger function not unlike the designated function of any mother within patriarchy: the inculcation of values necessary for the perpetuation of the patriarchal structure'.²⁰

Hence in my argument for a more nuanced reading of the maternal philanthropy represented by More, I am also making the case for a reinterpretation of early nineteenth-century Evangelicalism – recognising that there was more than one discourse associated with the movement; some of which can be described as paternal or patriarchal, and others that can be seen to offer a more feminised reading of Christianity and give greater emphasis to women's

²⁰Kowaleski-Wallace, p. 57; p. 73.

roles within it. Amanda Vickery, as well as Davidoff and Hall, have commented on the opportunities evangelical religion brought to women's lives in the form of 'religious associations, moral campaigns and organised charity'.²¹ In his history of the movement D. W. Bebbington underlines the huge numbers of women within evangelical religion as, 'Outside the formal setting of public worship, and even occasionally in it, women found opportunities for self-expression. In the proliferating cottage meetings of early Evangelicalism it was often women who took the lead in prayer and praise, counsel and exhortation.'²²

Nonetheless, if women did maintain more influence within evangelical communities than Kowaleski-Wallace allows, this influence was not unquestioned, as Thomas Laqueur and Mitzi Myers have both demonstrated in their examination of the relationship between lay-women and clergymen in such local spaces as the Sunday school.²³ More's novel is careful to avoid any sense of a power contest between the philanthropic female characters and the clergy, as in essence, the narrative is divided between describing the work of the female philanthropist in her parish and relating the long theological discussions of the male characters. Yet this balance comes under pressure as More continually defines active social influence as a solely feminine form of power. The male characters of *Coelebs* are consistently removed from the parochial sphere by their preoccupation with evangelical debate. Indeed, when they do assert their

²¹ Vickery, 'Golden Age', p. 399. See Davidoff and Hall, pp. 141-42.

²² D. W. Bebbington's *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 26.

²³ Thomas Walter Laqueur, *Religion and Respectability: Sunday Schools and Working Class Culture 1780-1850*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976). Mitzi Myers, "'A Peculiar Protection': Hannah More and the Cultural Politics of the Blagdon Controversy", in *History, Gender and Eighteenth-Century Literature*, ed. by Beth Fowkes Tobin, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), pp. 227-57.

presence in the community, it is in the form of a benevolent donation that is quickly translated by the women into a bond of influence between themselves and the recipient, thereby nullifying the role played by the male benefactor. This conversion of male finance into female influence echoes William Wilberforce's support of Hannah More's Sunday schools, where he stated 'If *you* will be at the trouble, *I* will be at the expense' – a system that enabled More's domination of all educational practices in the Mendips area and led to her establishment of twelve Sunday schools during the years 1789-1800.²⁴ Yet if men and women play seemingly separate roles in the community of *Coelebs*, this separation is undermined both by the hero Charles' spectatorship of female philanthropy and by the heroine Lucilla's frequent but silent presence during the men's religious debate. Thus while Hannah More does not probe the relationship between her gentlemen and women in their parish and religious communities, potential for a power contest over the parochial sphere remains embedded within her narrative.

Coelebs in Search of a Wife is structured around the hero Charles' search for the perfect woman to become his wife (the name 'Coelebs' reflects Charles status as young, unmarried man). Drawing heavily on his reading of Eve in *Paradise Lost* as Adam's ideal helpmeet – 'that tranquility, smoothness, and quiet beauty, which is of the very essence of perfection in a wife' – as well as his mother's insistence on the need for consistency in a conjugal partner, Charles' quest takes him through London society and an array of unsuitable, flighty young women before arriving at The Grove in Hampshire – the home of the Stanley

²⁴ Martha More, *The Mendip Annals: Or, A Narrative of the Charitable Labours of Hannah and Martha More in their Neighbourhood, being the Journal of Martha More*, ed. by Arthur Roberts, (London: James Nisbet and Co., 1859), p. 13.

family, his parents' lifelong friends.²⁵ Here, Charles meets the eldest Stanley daughter Lucilla, and it is soon apparent that he has met his match. The fact that Charles finds his ideal wife after he has moved from an urban to a rural environment exemplifies the importance of the relationship between the country estate and its surrounding villages to More's vision of effective female power. Lucilla is revealed to be an excellent manager of the familial home, as well as a thoughtful and caring philanthropist for her poor neighbours. Modest but also highly intelligent – Lucilla rarely speaks and when she does, it is usually accompanied by a blush - Lucilla thus works in *Coelebs* as an illustration of how women can attain influence over their community and reform their society through schemes of maternalist philanthropy.

The reader first becomes aware of Lucilla via the praise of The Grove's housekeeper Mrs. Comfit. Lucilla herself – ever More's ideal of feminine modesty – does not appear until the following chapter. Mrs. Comfit's remark that since Lucilla was sixteen years old she 'has taken almost all the family cares from her mamma' in inspecting 'the household affairs', delights and intrigues Charles who encourages the housekeeper to continue speaking of her young mistress.²⁶ The subsequent description of Lucilla's daily routine underlines her exemplary role in More's text, as the heroine's day is carefully portioned out into a busy schedule of domestic, charitable and educational tasks, leaving the reader with an overwhelming sense of Lucilla's capability and self-discipline:

In summer, sir, Miss Stanley rises at six, and spends two hours in her closet, which is stored with the best books. At eight she consults me on the state of provisions, and other family matters, and gives me a bill of

²⁵ More, *Coelebs*, p. 42.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 119.

fare, subject to the inspection of her mamma. [...] She looks over my accounts every week, which, being kept so short, give her but little trouble, and once a month she settles every thing with her mother. [...] After her morning's work, sir, does she come into company tired and cross, as ladies do who have done nothing, or are but just up? No; she comes in to make breakfast for her parents, as fresh as a rose, and as gay as a lark. An hour after breakfast, she and my master read some learned books together. She then assists in teaching her little sisters, and never were children better instructed. One day in a week she sets aside both for them and herself to work for the poor, whom she also regularly visits at their own cottages, two evenings in the week; for she says it would be troublesome and look ostentatious to have her father's doors crowded with poor people, neither could she get at their wants and their characters half so well as by going herself to their own houses.²⁷

Rather than depicting Lucilla as restricted within the domestic sphere, this account urges the existence of a specifically feminine form of knowledge and expertise.²⁸ Lucilla is seen to move between various household tasks and disciplines with the ease of a skilled manager, which adds to the feeling of professionalism that More seeks to create around domestic womanhood. The cook – so Mrs. Comfit tells us – ‘has great pleasure in acting under [Lucilla’s] direction, because she allows that miss understands when things are well done, and never finds fault in the wrong place’.²⁹ Crucially, Lucilla’s knowledge of cookery is matched by her evident intelligence, as well as her intellectual pursuits, since her daily routine allows her time with the ‘best books’ early in the morning, and also reading with her father after breakfast (reading that turns out to be lessons in Latin), before then teaching her younger siblings. Lucilla is also able to exercise her intelligence directly onto the household affairs in her

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 120.

²⁸ As seen in Anne Summers’ analysis of female philanthropy in ‘A Home from Home - Women’s Philanthropic Work in the Nineteenth Century’, in *Fit Work for Women*, ed. by Sandra Burman, (London: Croom Helm, 1979), pp. 33-63, and also more generally in Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace’s *Their Fathers Daughters*.

²⁹ More, *Coelebs*, p. 120.

management of The Grove's accounts. Lucilla's accounting serves as one of the many instances of female control over male money in *Coelebs*. It reflects the growing authority women were seen to have in the early nineteenth century as both consumers and directors of household budgets, but also accords with Edward Copeland's argument in *Women Writing About Money* that women's writing post-1800 increasingly entertained 'visions of economic empowerment', as didactic authors like Hannah More linked 'the domestic budget to social action'.³⁰ This connection between the household and the community is underlined by the fact that Lucilla's expertise in running The Grove enables her to exercise her authority in her wider community, as her domestic experience grants her an understanding of the needs of the poor in their own homes. Lucilla's movement between the landed estate and the homes of the poor thus underlines the relationship between a well-run house and a fully functioning community. This relationship challenges the idea of the domestic sphere as an inward looking, self-contained space of female action, whilst simultaneously placing the gentlewoman at the centre of positive community relations in the role of female philanthropist.

Although Lucilla is silent throughout much of *Coelebs*, her powers of conversation come to life over the topic of gardening. Even the self-obsessed Charles notes that he 'had never known [Lucilla] so communicative' as when he brings up the subject of gardening throughout the winter months.³¹ Lucilla's

³⁰ Edward Copeland, *Women Writing About Money: Women's Fiction in England, 1790-1820*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 5. For a historical discussion of women's power and influence as consumers see Clare Midgley's account of female sugar boycotts in *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780-1870*, (London: Routledge, 1992), as well as more generally, Amanda Vickery's study of eighteenth-century women's lives in *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England*.

³¹ More, *Coelebs*, p. 267.

evident passion for gardening reflects the interests of her author, who was known for her love of the activity.³² But the passion also adds to Lucilla's characterisation as a new, 'untempted Eve', with the surrounding estate of The Grove figuring as the female philanthropist's Eden.³³ As numerous characters describe Lucilla's devoted care towards her plants, the relationship between More's heroine and Eve is further underlined, as Lucilla is defined by ideas of nurture and mothering. This sense of nurture is augmented by Charles' discovery that alongside her flower garden, Lucilla has also created a nursery that provides fruit trees for her poor neighbours upon their wedding day:

She begged this piece of waste ground of her father, and stocked it with a number of fine young fruit trees of the common sort, apples, pears, plums, and the smaller fruits. When there is a wedding among the older servants, or when any good girl out of her school marries, she presents their little empty garden with a dozen young apple trees, and a few trees of the other sorts, never forgetting to embellish their little court with roses and honey-suckles. These last she transplants from the shrubbery, not to fill up the *village garden*, as it is called, with any thing that is of no positive use. She employs a poor lame man in the village a day in the week to look after this nursery, and by cuttings and grafts a good stock is raised on a small space. It is done at her own expence [sic], Mr. Stanley making this a condition when he gave her the ground; 'otherwise,' said he, 'trifling as it is, it would be my charity and not hers, and she would get thanked for a kindness which would cost her nothing.'³⁴

While Lucilla's act of charity is part of a wider paternalist venture carried out by her parents whenever any well-behaved servant of The Grove is deemed to have married prudently (Mr. Stanley provides the couple with land and building supplies; Mrs. Stanley gives them some kitchen furniture), Lucilla's role

³² Stott, p. 99.

³³ Patricia Demers, *The World of Hannah More*, (Lexington: Kentucky University Press, 1996), p. 90.

³⁴ More, *Coelebs*, pp. 241-42.

as gardener, coupled with her connections to Eve, lends the paternal scheme of the Stanleys' a maternal feel, as Lucilla's charity emphasises growth, nurture, and care, over the economic judgement of her father. Crucially, prior to Lucilla's involvement the village plot was merely a piece of waste ground that her father had deemed as without use. Yet if once again, the men of *Coelebs* are distanced from the active field of charity, Lucilla's garden underscores the female economic power embedded within More's model of philanthropy, as Lucilla's managing of her plot connects back to her domestic accounting, as well as sees her expand her domestic power into the parochial sphere of the village garden. This power can be seen in Lucilla's employment of a poor lame man from the village to tend to her plants, which as Patricia Demers persuasively argues in her Introduction to the Broadview edition of *Coelebs*, transforms the garden into 'a sphere of self-discovery and agency for Lucilla, since she alone imposes time checks, hires and pays an assistant, and materially supports and enhances the circumstances of local families'.³⁵ Demers' analysis here indicates the connections between Lucilla's charity and the marketplace - Lucilla is at once both philanthropist and employer – and challenges Dorice Williams Elliott's reading of the relationship between Lucilla and her assistant solely as a philanthropic one.³⁶

Indeed, even though Lucilla's care towards her employee is emphatically maternal, as she brings the man medicine and knits him a flannel waistcoat, and thus seemingly supports Elliott's interpretation of their interactions, the community space of the village garden remains closely associated with work and

³⁵ Demers, 'Introduction', in *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*, Hannah More (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2007), pp. 8-30, (p. 28).

³⁶ Elliott, p. 63.

industry. The time checks that Demers refers to in her analysis are enforced by Lucilla's hanging of her watch from a tree whilst gardening to ensure that she keeps within the 'prescribed bounds' of her schedule for that day and that her enjoyment of the activity does not lead to the neglect of her other responsibilities.³⁷ Both representative of the Evangelicals' insistence on self-regulation and the guarding against of sin (as Beth Fowkes Tobin also recognises), as well as the management of time in the world of industry, Lucilla's watch indicates how More blurs domestic, parochial and public settings in her novel.³⁸ While Lucilla's need for self-denial even in the most innocent of pleasures can appear as excessive and problematic to the modern reader, her discipline in More's text demonstrates women's capability of restraining their emotions during a period when women were frequently characterised as thoughtless, impulsive and self-indulgent. Referring to her daughter as 'half a nun', Mrs. Stanley places Lucilla in an association with More's earlier conduct book *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, which called for a more rational understanding and education of womanhood:

She should cultivate every study which, instead of stimulating her sensibility, will chastise it; which will neither create an excessive nor a false refinement; which will give her definite notions; will bring the imagination under dominion; will lead her to think, to compare, to combine, to methodise; which will confer such a power of discrimination, that her judgment shall learn to reject what is dazzling, if it be not solid; and to prefer, not what is striking, or bright, or new, but what is just.³⁹

³⁷ More, *Coelebs*, p. 268.

³⁸ See Beth Fowkes Tobin, *Superintending the Poor: Charitable Ladies and Paternal Landlords in British Fiction, 1770-1860*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 84: 'The watch in the garden is emblematic of More's belief that everyone, even the pious, must vigilantly monitor the state of their souls and be continually on guard against sinful impulses.'

³⁹ More, *Coelebs*, p. 267; More, *Strictures*, Vol. II, p. 3.

In thus refusing to indulge in her love of gardening at the expense of all other activities, Lucilla demonstrates her right to possess such authority in her community, as well as characterises the parochial sphere as a significant and rational setting for female activity.

Instead of working as another repetitive example of the heroine's extraordinary capabilities, the garden therefore extends female authority beyond the immediate vicinity of the domestic sphere. Lucilla's garden demonstrates the usefulness of women's domestic skills when applied to the wider community. As Judith Page and Elise Smith argue also in their study of women and gardens,

By linking them to women's charitable projects such as growing plants and produce for the poor, More proposes a public function for what might have been regarded as a private leisure activity and assigns value to the work in which women engage. What might look like a conservative proscription actually becomes a challenge for women to turn domestic labour into public good.⁴⁰

Moreover, not only does Lucilla's love for gardening enable her influence in the community, it also reinforces it, as her gifts of trees and flowers to the villagers support another aspect of her philanthropy - her cottage visiting. As Charles is taken on a tour around the garden he notes:

I now recollected that I had been pleased with observing so many young orchards and flourishing cottage-gardens in the village; little did I suspect the fair hand which could thus in a very few years diffuse an air of smiling comfort around these humble habitations, and embellish poverty itself. She makes, they told me, her periodical visits of inspection to see that neatness and order do not degenerate.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Judith W. Page and Elise L. Smith, *Women, Literature and the Domesticated Landscape: England's Disciples of Flora 1780-1870*, (Cambridge, CUP, 2011), p. 201.

⁴¹ More, *Coelebs*, p. 242.

Even as her presentation of the plants could imply a more egalitarian relationship between Lucilla and her neighbours based on feelings of friendship, her subsequent ‘periodical visits of inspection’ reveal that far from relinquishing ownership of her plants, Lucilla in fact retains control over them, and by extension, their recipients. The female philanthropist’s authority in checking the state of the villagers’ gardens illustrates how her role in the community reinforces society’s traditional structures, whilst promoting a reformed, maternal interaction between the classes – an idea typified by Lucilla’s growing of ‘a row of tall trees’ to mark the distinction between the ‘ladies’ flower garden’ and the village garden, an action at once nurturing and restrictive.⁴² This sense of Lucilla’s centrality to the maintenance of social cohesion and order is emphasised even further by the fact that the female philanthropist’s charity is self-perpetuating, as the present of the fruit trees leads to a visit to check on both them and their new owners, and then another, and another. As this cycle of female charity appears never ending, it also becomes inscribed within the rhythms of village life and naturalised – placing the philanthropic heroine at the heart of her community and seemingly vital to the maintenance of the natural order.

Yet although Lucilla regards herself as a ‘professional’ gardener, thereby further underlining the significance More gives to women’s work in the community sphere, it is important also to acknowledge the potential for discord within this parochial space between male and female ‘professionals’. While Lucilla’s garden is run entirely ‘at her own expence’ [sic], the land of course, originally belonged to her father, before Lucilla ‘begged’ it from him.

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 241.

Furthermore, Mr. Stanley also considers himself a ‘gardener’, but in his case he tends not to his land but to his daughters. When describing his authority over his children’s education to his male friends, Mr. Stanley asserts, ‘I am a gardener, you know, and accustomed to study the genius of the soil before I plant.’⁴³ Just as Lucilla exercises power and influence over the village through her gardening, her father also exercises control over his daughters, as his horticultural approach to their education concentrates on ideas of growth but also a need for order and containment:

Most of my daughters, like the daughters of other men, have some one talent, or at least propensity; for parents are too apt to mistake inclination for genius. This propensity I endeavour to find out, and to cultivate. But, if I find the natural bias very strong, and not very safe, I then labour to counteract, instead of encouraging the tendency [...] Phoebe, who has a superabundance of vivacity, I have in some measure tamed, but making her not only a complete mistress of arithmetic, but by giving her a tincture of mathematics.⁴⁴

Davidoff and Hall’s comment, ‘Children *as* gardens was a favourite metaphor for writers on domesticity’ during the period indicates that Mr. Stanley’s methods of education are not unusual.⁴⁵ Yet in regarding his daughter’s mind as a space to be cultivated as well as tamed, Mr. Stanley’s role as ‘chief gardener’ in *Coelebs* suggests potential problems for Lucilla’s own claims over the gardens of her community as the rational and natural extension of her domestic authority. For the men of the novel, the idea of female rationality remains something to be inculcated by male educators.

Despite these unresolved issues over female education, More underlines the significance of the gentlewoman to her community in one of the closing

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 267; p. 242; p. 319.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 319-20.

⁴⁵ Davidoff and Hall, p. 373.

scenes of her novel, as she demonstrates the ‘peculiarly Christian and peculiarly feminine’ heroism of the sickroom.⁴⁶ At the same time however, it is More’s hero Charles who observes this feminine setting, and his silent spectatorship raises unanswered questions about the role of the gentleman in the philanthropic and parochial spaces of *Coelebs*. Finding himself at a loose end one afternoon, Charles decides to take a walk around The Grove estate, where he finds himself at ‘the smallest and neatest cottage I ever beheld.’ Even before we enter the cottage, it is characterised as a female space with its ‘flourishing young orchard’, ‘little court full of flowers’ and its ‘beautiful rose tree in full blossom’ – and keeping Lucilla’s garden in mind, these plants also mark the cottage out as a space open to the influence of the female philanthropist. Drawn in by the beauty of the scene, Charles picks some of the roses and enters the dwelling unannounced. Once inside, he hears ‘the sound of a soft female voice’ upstairs, which arouses his interest: ‘Impelled by a curiosity which, considering the rank of the inhabitants, I did not feel it necessary to resist, I softly stole up the narrow stairs.’⁴⁷ While much has been made of the arrogant class politics of this scene (Charles’ assumption that he can enter the houses of the poor at will does make for uncomfortable reading), it is also important to recognise that Charles’ presence in the cottage remains a disruptive one, and that such disruption only heightens the sense of it as a private, feminine space.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ More, *Coelebs*, p. 297.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 338.

⁴⁸ See Mary Waldron in her ‘Introduction’ to the Thoemmes Press edition of *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*, (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1995), pp. v-xxx.

Upstairs, Charles discovers Lucilla and Phoebe attending to the sick Dame Alice – Lucilla reading the Bible; Phoebe cooking some broth for the woman over her fire. Initially, the narrator is able to watch the scene unobserved:

What were my emotions when I saw Lucilla Stanley kneeling by the side of a little clean bed, a large old Bible spread open on the bed before her, out of which she was reading one of the penitential psalms to a pale emaciated female figure, who lifted up her failing eyes, and clasped her feeble hands in solemn attention!

Before two little bars which served for a grate, knelt Phoebe, with one hand stirring some broth which she had brought from home, and with the other fanning with her straw bonnet the dying embers, in order to make the broth boil; yet seemingly attentive to her sister's reading. Her dishevelled hair, the deep flush which the fire and her labour of love gave her naturally animated countenance, formed a fine contrast to the angelic tranquillity and calm devotion which sat on the face of Lucilla. Her voice was inexpressibly sweet and penetrating, while faith, hope, and charity seemed to beam from her fine uplifted eyes. On account of the closeness of the room, she had thrown off her hat, cloak, and gloves, and laid them on the bed; and her fine hair, which had escaped from its confinement, shaded that side of her face which was next the door, and prevented her seeing me.

I scarcely dared to breathe lest I should interrupt such a scene. It was a subject not unworthy of Raphael.⁴⁹

Although Charles' gaze clearly frames this scene and lends it an erotic charge, as he catches the object of his affections unawares, this framing device does not detract from the feminine feel to the setting. With Charles' reference to Raphael's Madonna, but also with the nurturing activities of the two Stanley girls (who later feed the broth to Dame Alice together), the care of the poor is again defined as a specifically maternal act by Hannah More. The strong impression of holiness that the narrator grants to this maternal charity venerates the women's domestic activities and in her reading of the Bible to the sick woman, Lucilla

⁴⁹ More, *Coelebs*, pp. 338-39.

appears as one of God's messengers (importantly, a clergyman is nowhere to be seen). At this moment, Charles is represented as an outsider who has no place in the room. Through her female charity, More defines the community sphere as a private, female space, as demonstrated by the intimacy of Dame Alice in her bed, the 'dishevelled' appearance of Phoebe, and Lucilla's throwing off her outer garments and the looseness of her hair (an image that paradoxically, contrasts with Charles' simultaneous emphasis on Lucilla's angelic stillness). Charles is an intruder, and once he makes his presence known, he both disturbs Lucilla in her work and proves useless in his attempts to help: 'Phoebe, with her usual gaiety, called out to me to come and assist, which I did, but so unskilfully, that she chid me for my awkwardness.'⁵⁰

Indeed, the only way Charles seems able to support the Stanley girls in their charity is financially – slipping 'a couple of guineas' into the hand of Dame Alice and offering to fund the training of the old woman's granddaughter in a suitable employment.⁵¹ This scene echoes an earlier instance during Charles' stay in London, where when confronted with the destitute Fanny Stokes and her dying mother, he attempts to give money directly to the young girl: 'you may command my purse'. The attempt comes unstuck however, by the entrance of a 'venerable clergyman', whose comments about the beauty of Fanny suddenly cast Charles' benevolent desires in a new light and force him to give to the girl via his friend Lady Belfield: 'I put my purse into Lady Belfield's hands, declining to make any present myself, lest after the remark he had just made, I should incur the

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 339.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 340.

suspicions of the worthy clergyman.’⁵² Lady Belfield later arranges for Fanny to become her children’s governess – privileging a long-term scheme of employment over Charles’ short-term approach. As Dorice Williams Elliott also recognises, More makes an implied connection here ‘between sexual excitation and [masculine] benevolent urges’, which enables an understanding of ‘direct philanthropic efforts by men [as] dangerous’ and leaves ‘the field open for middle- and upper-class women’. Yet for Elliott, this framing of benevolence within ideas of indulgence and sensuality is equally problematic for the women of *Coelebs*, since their central role in the philanthropic arena comes about only ‘at the cost of suppressing their [own] desires for pleasure.’ This repressive view of More’s female philanthropy is undermined however, by Lucilla and her love of gardening, which although restrained by time checks, enables her to exercise a powerful and *rational* influence in the community sphere that More’s narrative defines as ‘peculiarly feminine’.⁵³ Indeed, by the time Charles faces a similar situation with Dame Alice and her granddaughter, his reaction reveals how far he has learnt More’s central lesson, as Charles defers all authority in philanthropy to the Stanley girls, and with ‘much diffidence’ entreats that he ‘might be permitted to undertake the putting forward Dame Alice’s little girl in the world’. Of course Charles does not restrain his benevolent impulses entirely, since he also presses ‘a couple of guineas’ into the hand of ‘the good old Dame’, but his financial contribution is held in stark contrast with the maternal care of Hannah More’s female philanthropists, and further underlines the status of the philanthropic heroine in this scene.⁵⁴ Charles’ money thus places him in the background of the

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 106; p. 107.

⁵³ Elliott, p. 73; More, p. 297.

⁵⁴ More, *Coelebs*, p. 342; p. 340.

novel's charitable projects, whilst Lucilla's active charity confirms the power and influence open to gentlewomen in the community sphere.

The authority of the middle- and upper-class woman in all charitable matters continues to be illustrated via the roses of Dame Alice. As Charles talks with Lucilla and Phoebe on their way back to the Grove on the merits of Dame Alice's garden, it transpires that one of the key reasons behind Lucilla's presents of plants to the poor is to strengthen the power of working women over their own home and husbands:

'We have always,' replied Phoebe, 'a particular satisfaction in observing a neat little flower garden about a cottage, because it holds out a comfortable indication that the inhabitants are free from absolute want, before they think of these little embellishments.'

'It looks, also,' said Miss Stanley, 'as if the woman, instead of spending her few leisure moments in gadding abroad, employed them in adorning her little habitation, in order to make it more attractive to her husband. And we know more than one instance in this village in which the man has been led to give up the public house by the innocent ambition of improving on her labours.'⁵⁵

Thus in giving her flowers to the villagers, Lucilla not only guarantees her continued involvement in the lives of the poor, she also empowers their female recipients to place their home life in direct competition with the masculine world of the public house – successfully reforming the community according to values of femininity and domesticity. The roses become a symbol of female strength and virtue here, as Lucilla's gift (and continued superintendence), along with the working women's maintenance and nurture, marks them out as agents of moral reform, which as the sharing of the roses demonstrates, is represented as women's unique role in *Coelebs*. These roses of Dame Alice reappear at the close of the chapter, as Lucilla wears the bunch picked by Charles in her hair to

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 340.

dinner. Although this act seemingly reveals Lucilla's love for More's hero, because these roses are also Dame Alice's, the growing relationship between Charles and Lucilla remains located within the sphere of female philanthropy.

Thus in wearing the roses Lucilla is simultaneously presented as a romantic and a philanthropic heroine by More. With the looming marriage between Charles and Lucilla concluding the novel, it is evident that their future home will be shaped by the 'peculiarly Christian and peculiarly feminine' virtues of its philanthropic mistress.⁵⁶ Lucilla's roses and her gardening are therefore constant reminders of women's influence in the domestic and parochial spheres. As imagined by Hannah More, this influence remains on the whole, uncontested. Yet as Henry Thompson's biography *The Life of Hannah More* later demonstrated, this representation of the female philanthropist in her parish was in fact informed by women's borderline experience of citizenship during the nineteenth century, and thus contained inherent tensions.

Henry Thompson

The Life of Hannah More: with Notices of her Sisters (1838)

A week after carrying out the funeral of Hannah More, the curate of Wrington Church, Henry Thompson, gave a sermon to his congregation entitled 'The Christian an Example'. In this instance, the exemplary Christian was none other than More herself: "Full of good works and almsdeeds" is what the Bible makes the very designation of a Christian; - what memory tells us was the description of

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 297.

HANNAH MORE.⁵⁷ Understandably, Thompson's description of More's life and achievements emphasises her Christianity and urges his parishioners to emulate her pious example. In doing so however, the curate – a subsequent biographer of More – neglects significant aspects of More's life that seemingly threaten his image of perfect Christian femininity, such as her role in Wilberforce's anti-slavery campaigns, her life in Samuel Johnson's London, and her commercial success as a writer of plays, tracts, conduct books and a novel. With these parts of More's life unacknowledged by Thompson, his sermon is able to underline the 'consistency' of Hannah More – a woman whose writings, according to the Appendix added after the publication of *The Christian an Example* 'are not controversial' (Thompson's italics).⁵⁸ Intriguingly, in stressing the consistency of his subject, Thompson turns to *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* for reinforcement:

It is a peculiar advantage which we possess in studying the character of this bright ornament of the Church, that we may read it in the living language of her own writings. Her pen and her example wrought together. What one taught, the other confirmed, illustrated, interpreted. 'If it be absurd,' said she, 'to expect perfection, it is not unreasonable to expect consistency.' And consistent she ever was.⁵⁹

By quoting Charles' quest for perfect consistency in his future wife, Thompson blurs the figure of Hannah More with her fictional creation Lucilla Stanley, who is the very model of regularity and balanced womanhood. And thus as More used Lucilla to exemplify proper female conduct to her readers, More in

⁵⁷ Henry Thompson, *The Christian an Example. A Sermon, preached in the Parish Church of Wrington, Somerset, on the Sunday after the Funeral of Mrs. Hannah More, which took place there September 13, 1833*, (London: J. G. and F. Rivington, 1833), p. 7.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 19.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 7.

Thompson's hands, is employed in the same way, as Thompson stresses to his female congregation how More's charitable endeavours can be replicated in their own lives:

Let our 'admiration' be *fruitful*; it cannot transfer to us her intellectual qualities, but it may lead us, through the grace of God, to what is yet more valuable, and what she has acknowledged to be so. It may lead us to her simple faith and piety, her active holiness, her enlightened and spiritual attachment to our common Church, her liberal benevolence, her earnest zeal in the dissemination of the truth, and the forwardness to do our duty in that state of life into which it has pleased God to call us, which our Catechism has taught from our Bible, and which none knew better than herself to teach or to practise.⁶⁰

Crucially, and unlike More with Lucilla, Thompson is reluctant to exemplify women's intellectual and managerial potential as philanthropists. While like More, Thompson emphasises the importance of gentlewomen to their parishes, his descriptions of More's local charity work maintain a much stronger sense of Church hierarchies than seen in *Coelebs*, as More is depicted as attached to the 'common Church' and carrying out 'the Saviour's own work' of 'preaching the Gospel to the poor', which Thompson, somewhat condescendingly notes his approval of: 'This is the noblest of charities'.⁶¹

Thompson's discussion of More in the sermon is representative of his treatment of the female philanthropist in his subsequent biography, published five years later – *The Life of Hannah More: with notices of her sisters*. In this text, Thompson offers a meeker version of More's philanthropy and character, and avoids – where possible – her more complicated negotiations with parochial and public space. As Thompson transforms Hannah More into a biographical character, she comes to represent a socially conservative form of female

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 18.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p. 16.

philanthropy that is devoid of the maternal power found in Lucilla Stanley, and which upholds the paternalistic narrative of her biographer. This refashioning of More underlines how the conservatism at the heart of her depictions of middle-class womanhood leaves her own image susceptible to the paternal discourse located within early nineteenth-century Evangelicalism, as well as illustrates the insecurities integral to More's model of female influence.

Thompson's use of More in his biography to demonstrate an idealised form of Evangelical womanhood was not unusual however. As Juliette Atkinson illustrates in *Victorian Biography Reconsidered: A Study of Nineteenth-Century 'Hidden' Lives*, the majority of Victorian biographies were exemplary, and moreover, readers,

expected biographers to provide some form of guidance. However sparse the biographer's commentary within a work, readers clung to the device of a final chapter, or couple of paragraphs, in which the biographer would summarise the lessons of the life just depicted and deliver a verdict on the subject.

Furthermore, Atkinson claims, 'It was not rare for evangelical biographies to sell thousands of copies'.⁶² Hence Thompson was probably aware that his narrative of Hannah More's life had the potential to instruct numerous female readers in his own Evangelical-influenced vision of society. Arguably, it is this desire for instruction that informs Thompson's opening dedication of *The Life of Hannah More* to the newly crowned Queen Victoria – a dedication, which as Anne Stott notes, Thompson went to some lengths to procure – as he underlines the importance of Hannah More's example to the new age:

⁶² Juliette Atkinson, *Victorian Biography Reconsidered: A Study of Nineteenth-Century 'Hidden' Lives*, (Oxford: OUP, 2010), pp. 25-26; p. 16.

As one of the most distinguished ornaments of her sex, the memory of Hannah More, I felt, could no where be more appropriately cherished than in the heart of Your Majesty; as the steady supporter and zealous maintainer of the throne, the record of her loyalty might hope to repose in its shadow; as the eloquent advocate and diligent propagator of the Protestant Faith held by the Church established in these realms, to none could the narrative of her life look so hopefully for countenance as to the Defender of that Faith, and the temporal Head of that Church.⁶³

Nevertheless, whilst the conservatism of More's life and writings enables this transformation of her into an ornament of her sex, the reforming aspects of More's philanthropy – both in the terms of moral and political reform – consistently trouble Thompson's characterisation of the female philanthropist as modest, submissive and domestically inclined. Even as Thompson devotes most of his narrative to examining More's philanthropy within her Somerset community, this concentration on More's parochial field of action is made fraught by the philanthropist's repeated and insistent claims over the surrounding parishes of her home as hers to govern and influence. As Martha More's account of her sister's charity in *The Mendip Annals* demonstrates, these claims for female power were frequently justified by the perception of clerical neglect in the parish, or by a frank disregard for particular clergymen. Writing about Cheddar, Martha More asserts,

This large and deserted village was left without a resident minister; and it is a fact, that if there be a necessity to marry, christen, or bury, it must be postponed till the Sunday; and there is as much knowledge of Christ in the interior of Africa as there is to be met with in this wretched, miserable place.⁶⁴

In focusing on More in the parish, Thompson in fact engages with a rival to his authority, and he struggles to keep his subject in her proper, subordinate position

⁶³ Stott, p. 313; Henry Thompson, *Hannah More*, p. iii-iv.

⁶⁴ Martha More, p. 16.

as a laywoman to the Church. Thompson's difficulties with the complexities of Hannah More's public and parochial philanthropy are evident in his treatment of two of the more notable campaigns of More's long and active life: the campaign against slavery, and the promotion of education for the working classes of the Cheddar region. It is with the biographer's depiction of what came to be known as 'The Blagdon Controversy' however, that the power contests within women's parochial sphere of influence are brought most sharply into relief. Consideration of this episode will close my analysis of Thompson's biography.

Thompson's separation of Hannah More from the politics of her reforming projects is apparent in his representation of More's involvement in the Evangelical-led anti-slavery campaigns of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This desire of Thompson to distinguish his heroine from the more public aspects of their shared religious beliefs draws out the multiple narratives associated with Evangelicalism – some of which encouraged women to concern themselves with ideas of national morality, and some that enforced a stark line between the home and the world. Significantly, the description of Hannah More's participation in the anti-slavery movement is brief, and is located between a discussion of her work to reform the manners of the upper classes in *Thoughts on the Importance of the Manners of the Great to General Society* (1788), and Thompson's description of More's reformation of the domestic habits of the poor via her Sunday schools and benefit clubs.⁶⁵ This focus on the domestic, personal aspect of More's work is underlined by the way in which Thompson's biography describes More's commitment to anti-slavery as ignited

⁶⁵ Hannah More, *Thoughts on the Importance of the Manners of the Great to General Society*, (London: T. Cadell, 1788).

by her growing friendships with William Wilberforce and John Newton, but also by her first hand experience of the slave trade as a resident of Bristol: ‘She had even seen, as she informs us in a note to her poem, the chains and torturing instruments employed to coerce the slaves on their voyage.’ This experience coupled with Wilberforce’s and Newton’s ‘declamatory description’ of slavery, so Thompson tells us, compels More to write a poem against the traffic in order to promote the Abolitionist campaign. Thus narrated from Thompson’s perspective, More’s involvement with the abolitionists becomes curiously apolitical – More is depicted as concerned about slavery because of a ‘stricter intimacy’ with two new male friends and because of what she personally witnesses. Unlike Wilberforce, who actively urges the facts of slavery ‘with all the zeal of humanity, and all the might of eloquence, upon the indignant notice of the British legislature’, More is a passive recipient of others’ opinions and events around her – she does not intellectualise the issue but rather, responds emotionally to it, thereby seemingly giving the lie to her insistence on women’s rationality in *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*.⁶⁶

This sense of Thompson’s desire to play down More’s role in the anti-slavery cause is then amplified by his discussion of More’s poem *Slavery* (1788).⁶⁷ Significantly, Thompson ignores the political dimension of *Slavery*, which, as Claire Midgley notes in her study of female abolitionists, was published ‘explicitly as propaganda to aid Wilberforce at his opening of the Parliamentary campaign against the slave trade in 1788’.⁶⁸ Thompson undermines More’s public influence on the matter, as he asserts, ‘The precise

⁶⁶ Henry Thompson, *Hannah More*, p. 83.

⁶⁷ Hannah More, *Slavery, A Poem*, (London: T. Cadell, 1788).

⁶⁸ Midgley, p. 32.

effect which this poem produced in the advancement is not easy to assign: many other causes were concurrent in the same happy direction'. While the poem is held as 'eminently popular' and 'commended' by the clergy, its political aspect and moreover, its relation to the work of Wilberforce, as well as its long publication life within the abolitionary sphere via anti-slavery magazines well into the 1830s is absent.⁶⁹ Although as Midgley's book reveals, such silence is in fact typical of a wider and historical ignorance concerning women's role in the anti-slavery movement, Thompson – who had access to many of More's letters and works – is seen here to deliberately underplay the relationship between his female subject and the political sphere of the late eighteenth century.

This strategy of Thompson locates More within the domestic spaces of his text, but it also distances the female philanthropist from an 'improper' association with the world of masculine politics embodied here by the figure of William Wilberforce. Wilberforce – who maintained a close, lifelong friendship with More – is in fact a notable absence throughout the biography, despite More's involvement with his anti-slavery cause, Wilberforce's participation with More's Sunday schools and More's strong connections with the Clapham Sect. Although Thompson's Preface, which lists the sources of his biography, suggests that he was unable to directly access the numerous letters between More and Wilberforce, this lack of access is arguably irrelevant since many of these letters were available in the public domain, as they were published by William Roberts in his 1834 *The Life and Correspondence of Mrs. Hannah More*. Indeed, Volume II of Roberts' memoir is littered with references to Wilberforce by More, as well

⁶⁹ Henry Thompson, *Hannah More*, p. 84. For the role of Hannah More's poetry in the British anti-slavery campaigns see Midgley p. 58.

as exchanges between the philanthropist and the politician. These exchanges reveal the close connections More maintained with Wilberforce's campaigning and moreover, his financing of her Sunday school project. In 1789 More writes,

I joyfully accept the honourable office of your almoner, on condition that you will find fault with and direct me with as little scruple, as I shall have in disposing of your money. Patty is very proud of being admitted into the confederacy, and being appointed superintendent of Cheddar; a title, however, she will only hold by delegation in my too long absences, for I like my dignity too well, to allow her to be more than *vice-queen*.

What a comfort I feel, in looking round on these starving and half-naked multitudes, to think that by your liberality many of them may be fed and clothed: and Oh, if but one soul is rescued from eternal misery, how may we rejoice over it in another state, where perhaps it may not be one of our smallest felicities, that our friendship was turned to some useful account, in advancing the good of others, and, as I humbly presume to hope, in preparing ourselves for that life which shall have no end.⁷⁰

The tone of this letter verges on the flirtatious: 'I joyfully accept the honour of being your almoner', as well as speaks of the shared emotional and religious bonds between the two friends: 'Oh, if but one soul is rescued from eternal misery, how may we rejoice over it'. Significantly, it also links the local, philanthropic schemes of More with the money of the politician in a process that anticipates the gendered approach to philanthropy seen in *Coelebs*. This relationship between male donation and female charity is notably missing in Thompson's biography, thereby denying an important aspect of the female philanthropist's role in transforming the economics of the marketplace into social good. While Roberts' reproduction of More's letters demonstrates the mutual connections between the spheres of female philanthropy and male political

⁷⁰ 'From Miss H. More to Mr. Wilberforce', in *Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Mrs. Hannah More Vol. II*, ed. by William Roberts, (London: R. B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 1834), 2nd edn., 4 vols., pp. 217-18.

economy, Thompson does not provide his reader with information about the finances behind More's charity schools except in the 'Postscript' at the end of his narrative, where he quotes from an extract from Martha More's diary (later published as *The Mendip Annals*) that had been included in the recently published *The Life of William Wilberforce* (1838):

It was at length decided in a few words, by Mr. W.'s exclaiming, 'If you will be at the trouble, I will be at the expense.' Something, commonly called an impulse, crossed my heart, that told me it was God's work, and it would succeed; and though I never have, nor probably shall, recover the same emotion, yet it is my business to water it with watchfulness, and to act up to its then dictates. Mr. Wilberforce and his sister left us in a day or two afterwards. We turned many schemes in our head every possible way; at length, those measures were adopted which led to the foundation of the different schools.⁷¹

Although Thompson claims that this information about Wilberforce and More's schools only became known to him after reading *The Life of William Wilberforce* and thus was 'not received in time for incorporation with' the chapter on More's philanthropy in the Mendips, his statement is called into question by the existence of the earlier text by Roberts.⁷² Regardless of the 'truth' in this matter, the act of consigning the financial and political aspects of female philanthropy to a postscript outside of the main narrative has the effect of creating a false divide between the public and private worlds of Hannah More, as Thompson buries the connections between More's parochial charity and the economic and social issues of the day.

⁷¹ Henry Thompson, *Hannah More*, p. 381. See Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce*, 5 vols., (London: John Murray, 1838).

⁷² Henry Thompson, *Hannah More* p. 380.

Thompson's account of the origins behind More's Sunday schools adds to this diminution of the philanthropist, as the narrative strives to remove any sense of More's agency in the establishment of her institutions. In Thompson's biography, More is inspired to set up her first school at Cheddar as she 'rambles through the picturesque neighbourhood of her dwelling' and encounters the poverty – both material and spiritual – of her neighbours.⁷³ Yet in emphasising More's close and direct involvement with the people of her community, Thompson in fact only highlights the contrast between More's active presence in her neighbourhood and the absence of the clergy, whose neglect of their duties has contributed to the sufferings of the poor. This neglect is only grudgingly acknowledged by Thompson and tempered by excuses that shift the blame for this negligence onto the poor themselves:

The vicar, an aged man, was not in residence, nor was there any resident curate; no clergyman had resided in the parish for forty years. [...] It can scarcely be necessary to inform the reader that the laws of the Church of England, if properly enforced, would have remedied this grievous abuse; but the parishioners were too deeply sunk in ignorance and profligacy to be sensible of any existing grievance, and were well contented to remain undisturbed by the topicks [sic] of 'righteousness, temperance, and judgement to come.'⁷⁴

Thompson's narrative attempts to counteract this image of an inattentive clergy by reclaiming the parish from Hannah More for himself, as the curate of Wrington Church. This reclaiming is achieved by Thompson's description of a walk he took amongst the Cheddar caves 'not more than four years since', which he offers in place of narrating More's own journey within the locale.⁷⁵

⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 84.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 87.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p. 85.

Thompson's account of the continued poverty of Cheddar's inhabitants implies the limits to More's philanthropy, but also promotes an image of himself as a visiting, active clergyman, who like Hannah More, is unafraid of entering threatening neighbourhoods in the pursuit of God's work. This replacement of the female philanthropist with the biographer in her own life story underscores the tensions between women and men of influence in the parochial sphere. As Thompson proceeds to describe the neighbourhood of Cheddar as a space that is both anti-domestic and anti-feminine, he thus denies the activity and strength of Hannah More in transforming the lives of these wild and threatening individuals.

From his arrival at the cave, the biographer-narrator indicates that he has arrived into a space beyond that of civilisation and humanity by illustrating the setting's challenges to conventional assumptions of domesticity and femininity. Rather than providing safety and comfort, the cave is depicted as 'far better adapted for a sepulchre than a dwelling' – with damp and stalactites being the interior's defining features. The only protection offered against 'external violence' is in the form of a 'rough wooden door', which 'rudely' follows the 'cavern's mouth'. The sense here is of a primitive space but also of a space that subverts the idealised family home. This idea of the Cheddar caves as antagonistic to middle-class ideology is then underlined by Thompson's depiction of the area's female inhabitants, who are described with both scientific detachment and horror. Confronted with the women's 'wild' version of femininity, the narrator relies on a scientific vocabulary to ensure the distance between himself and the females. The women are both de-sexed and depersonalised by Thompson, as he writes of 'samples' and specimens, '*a* human

being' (emphasis added) and claims that 'nothing but their female garb could associate in the traveller's mind with an idea of the sex'.⁷⁶

Nevertheless, this distance between the narrator and the 'wild and squalid' women is made fraught by fears of contagion and violent attack. An uneasy suggestion of the women's sexuality permeates the passage, as the female inhabitants hang on the narrator's 'path at every step' and offer to 'exhibit' the area. Simultaneous to Thompson's scientific distance is an anxious depiction of proximity between his own body and those of the women. The desire of the working-class females to tell him the stories of the area threatens to infect the biographer's text with a lower-class narrative – an infection that has the ominous potential to become violent, as the women engage 'in furious and even sanguinary contentions' in their attempts to attract the narrator's attention. As Thompson moves from describing his own journey back to recreating that of Hannah More's, his image of More exerting her 'powers which she had retired to cultivate and apply' over the parish comes into unsettling contact with the unrestrained power of the working-class women. Crucially however, Thompson depicts More's power as God given, thereby stressing More's spirituality over her physical work in the community, which ultimately saw her carrying out twenty mile roundtrips on Sundays to inspect her schools and clubs. Rather than More personally generating her philanthropic plans, her work is represented as divinely influenced and directed:

Here, then, appeared a field amply requiring the exertion of those powers which she had retired to cultivate and apply. Yet it might well seem calculated to bid defiance to any agency short of a miracle. But Hannah More remembered that the blessing of God, even when not miraculously

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 85-86.

visible, may yet be effectively present; and in prayerful reliance on Him who can turn the wilderness to the garden of the Lord, she reflected what human measure would be the most likely to succeed, resolving, 'in the power of His might,' to adopt whatever an enlightened conscience might approve, with steady courage and with vigorous promptitude.⁷⁷

All agency here belongs to the miraculous, as the parish in Thompson's text is defined solely as a ecclesiastical space, as opposed to an arena of practical, female work.

Thompson further develops this emphasis on More's purifying influence in his description of her Sunday schools. Throughout this section of the text, More is depicted as the gentlewoman *par excellence*, as she clothes the children of her school, as well as provides spiritual comfort and guidance: 'A girl who continued to attend the school till her marriage, received on that occasion a pair of white stockings of Mrs. More's own knitting, five shillings, and a Bible; and clothing was distributed annually to the children.'⁷⁸ With these scenes, Thompson can be seen to draw on the similarities between Lucilla Stanley's maternal charity and More's own philanthropy, as the children in Thompson's biography – like Dame Alice in *Coelebs* - gratefully submit to a middle-class culture of piety, cleanliness and domesticity. Significantly however, when Thompson moves from describing More's schools to her benefit clubs for working women, this idea of maternal care is complicated by images of regulation and structure, as Thompson struggles to maintain his 'natural' depiction of More's maternal philanthropy when directed towards adult women – the same sort of women who caused him so much trouble during his walks around Cheddar. Describing schemes that are reminiscent of organised,

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p. 86.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p. 101.

economic systems of Mr. Stanley, Thompson presents More as successfully transforming a previously irregular working-class economy subject to periods of excess and deprivation, in addition to reorganising their experiences of ill-health:

In some of the parishes the number of members soon amounted to 150; and in less than ten years many hundreds of pounds were saved by this class for sickness and confinements. The payments in the former case were three shillings per week; in the latter, seven shillings and sixpence at once. These advantages were secured by a subscription of three halfpence per week, and exact conformity to the school regulations; and they had the effect of bringing many children to the schools whose parents would otherwise have been hostile or indifferent.⁷⁹

The regular payments demanded by More for membership in her clubs, as well as her insistence on ‘exact conformity to the school regulations’, somewhat undermine earlier scenes in *The Life of Hannah More* where Thompson emphasises the natural, female emotion behind the philanthropist’s charity. They also seemingly support Beth Fowkes Tobin’s reading of More’s philanthropy in the Mendips as strongly influenced by the philosophies of Jeremy Bentham, as Tobin sees in the charity of Hannah More ‘similar disciplining strategies’ to those advocated by the Panopticon, with More’s emphasis on surveillance and ‘self-denial’ promising ‘a new form of self-management’.⁸⁰ Yet embedded within both Thompson’s fraught depictions of More’s ‘natural’ maternalism and these images of surveillance and superintendence that Tobin responds to, is a sense of working-class resistance to More’s philanthropic schemes, as More is shown as resorting to the lure of sickness benefits to ensure the attendance of those children at her schools whose parents were either indifferent or hostile.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p. 102.

⁸⁰ Tobin, p. 4.

This sense of hostility – only fleetingly referred to by Thompson – gestures to a representation of the female philanthropist that underlines her skill in negotiation and compromise, and transforms her setting of the parish into the sphere of local politics.

Crucially, the political aspect of More's philanthropy is frequently demonstrated by her sister Martha's journal from the period, which was later published as *The Mendip Annals*. In Martha More's text, we see herself and her sister cajoling local farmers into supporting their schools, as if they 'had been soliciting a vote at an election', and as their schools and clubs are established, Martha More often refers to the 'bribes' necessary to ensure the support and attendance of the poor at the very schemes intended for their benefit: '

We had long promised the old schools a dinner, as a bribe for good behaviour during our absence, and the prospect of the feast, as they called it, was a charm so captivating, that it procured many a task to be learned with pleasure, for the sake of obtaining one good dinner.⁸¹

Indeed, even as the Mores engage in persuading the poor to support their institutions, other local women are noted by Martha More as seeking to rival their influence via bribery:

The Draycott children, remarkable for regular attendance in all weathers, though two miles distant, were now, as well as their parents, offered a high bribe for *non*-attendance. Mrs. S-, a great lady of the village, threw out the temptation of a glass of gin to any person every time they kept from the school, and used her lawful power by not suffering her servant boy to attend, who had hitherto been constant, and who was grieved at the disappointment. The gin was firmly rejected at first, but we fear has had some influence since.⁸²

⁸¹ Martha More, p. 14; p. 36.

⁸² *Ibid*, p. 60.

The fight between the More sisters and Mrs. S- over the poor of their community suggests the potential political and economic power gentlewomen could maintain in their neighbourhoods, as well as indicates a different picture of the rural poor than the one found in the analysis of Beth Fowkes Tobin. Martha More's diary sees the working classes engage in a series of negotiations with their social superiors, and choose according to *their preferences*, the enticement they liked the most. For if women like Hannah More had the financial power to provide a 'good dinner' in return for the attendance of her schools, the poor's own power came in their acquiescence – their listening to what the More sisters called their 'charge', which took the form of a lecture given during the feast days of the schools and clubs. While from one perspective, this charge appears as another form of the Mores' repressive disciplining of the working classes, *The Mendip Annals* reveals it as more akin to a compromise. For although the charge was evidently very important to Martha More (she frequently writes them out in full in her journals), her account of their reception implies their lack of significance to their audience:

Two modest-looking brides came forward, and received the marriage portion, promised in the articles, of five shillings, a pair of worsted stockings of our knitting, and a Bible. This was a very merry part of the feast; every one busy in advising the brides how to dispose of the wedding portion; every one dissuading them from eating it, but counselling them to buy a tea-spoon or some bit of plate. We have always accustomed ourselves to give some little sort of exhortation at the conclusion of all our meetings; something independent of the sermon or the clergyman. Some one has wittily called it a *charge*.⁸³

Here, it is clear the economies of the working class take precedence over the charge of the female philanthropist, as the women take greater care and

⁸³ *Ibid*, p. 82.

pleasure in advising the new brides how to spend their allowance from the benefit club. In the same year (1793) at the feast day for the Cheddar club, the priorities of the working women are again revealed against and contrasted with the aims of the More sisters' charity: 'One bride only demanded the marriage-portion, a modest, sweet young woman; and she received the same good advice from her club sisters how to spend this great sum; but none seemed anxious to tell when, or how often, she was to read her new Bible.'⁸⁴ Thus although Martha More's journals reveal the power of the gentlewoman in her parish, they also recognise the agency of the poor, as the philanthropist describes her and her sister's difficulties in persuading them to their cause. The maternalist charity of *The Mendip Annals* is therefore characterised neither by the domination seen by Tobin nor by the natural feeling emphasised by Thompson, but by negotiation and working-class consent – something that is highly problematic for Thompson's own account of Hannah More's philanthropy.

In Thompson's description of the school and club feast days, these problems are evident, as the biographer has to justify the negotiations that the festivities symbolise, and also maintain the influence of the female philanthropist throughout the day. The last issue is particularly difficult, since as Thomas Laqueur indicates in his study of nineteenth-century Sunday schools, the feast day was especially important to the poor and was claimed by them as their own event: 'the recreational, cultural and social activities of the Sunday school were far more important to students than to teachers. [...] The anniversary celebration [...] is important as the major event of the Sunday school year which provided,

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, p. 86.

for months in advance, a focus for the students' energies.'⁸⁵ Thompson thus works to maintain the influence of the female philanthropist through a continued stress upon ideas of structure and regulation. He justifies the existence of the festivities as ensuring the stability of More's philanthropy, as well as reassures the reader that More kept the feasts secure from the 'excesses' that 'too frequently deform the anniversaries of friendly societies.' As Thompson offers a generalised picture of the benefit clubs' festivities, the biographer traces a path from the parish church to the 'schoolroom', where the poor are 'served with tea and cakes by Mrs. More and her sisters.' Thus although the women are permitted their feast, the day remains contained within the structured and secure settings of the church and the school. Moreover, although the novelty of being served by their social superiors allows the women to enjoy an inversion of the class order, it also ensures their attendance for the charge:

After tea, the society's accounts were examined, and the journal read. The latter recorded every important particular relating to the society and its members in the course of the past year. On these, Mrs. More herself, or one of her sisters, commented plainly, forcibly, and impartially.⁸⁶

A comparison between Thompson's version of the charge and Martha More's, underlines the biographer's strain to maintain a hierarchical sense of class relations in Hannah More's philanthropy, as the women's reception of this lecture is left unexplored by Thompson's narrative. Indeed, Thompson's version of the charge becomes symbolic of the account of the day offered by his biography, as the feast sees Thompson's female philanthropist effortlessly

⁸⁵ Laqueur, pp. 176-77.

⁸⁶ Henry Thompson, *Hannah More*, pp. 102-103.

educating the poor in middle-class manners and behaviour simply through her observation. Just as the More sisters study the women for any deviation from club regulations, the women study each other and themselves, and thereby regulate their conduct and appearance accordingly. Any concerns about the immorality of the 'day of show and festivity' are nullified, as the poor's love of exhibition becomes a tool in the middle classes' reformulation of working-class female behaviour:

The effects of these publick [sic] displays may be well imagined. Every member of the club was aware that her conduct would be subjected to the exact scrutiny of the neighbours she most dreaded or respected, and of persons in whose presence, but for these institutions, she could never have expected to stand; and a strict correctness of morality, which, though it is not religion, is both indispensable to it, and favourable to its growth, was at once the consequence in many instances where laxity of morals had formerly borne its natural proportion to religious ignorance. A favourite excuse among the lower class for absence from church is 'want of clothes.' On these anniversaries, however, neat and clean apparel was indispensable. Habits of frugality had made it easily attainable; and the thing once attained, the ground of the pretext, and the inclination to employ it, passed away together.⁸⁷

Thompson is unable to maintain this harmonious vision of More's local charity however, and this is something that he himself recognises, as he concludes the section of his narrative devoted to More's charitable and reforming works: 'The cloud was gathering, and we must now pursue its rise.'⁸⁸ This 'cloud' that the biographer refers to, is a series of fierce disputes over Hannah More and her Sunday schools in the years 1799-1803 that came to be known as the Blagdon Controversy, and which, as Anne Stott comments, represents 'the

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 103-104.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p. 178.

most problematic episode in More's career'.⁸⁹ Although it rapidly acquired extra dimensions, the Blagdon Controversy started out as a quarrel between Hannah More and the curate of Blagdon, Thomas Bere, over the nature of her school in his parish, which Bere regarded as promoting Methodism. Writing to More in 1799, Bere's wife alleged that the master of Blagdon school, Henry Young, was holding Monday evening meetings that closely resembled Methodist classes in their emphasis on enthusiasm and extempore prayer. These allegations of Sarah Bere reflect contemporary anxiety about Methodism, but also, as Stott argues, highlight one of the key questions about More's parochial philanthropy: the exact 'authority of the parish clergyman over the Sunday schools', as Young seemingly challenged the power of Bere through the practices of his meetings.⁹⁰ Sarah Bere's letter to More represents Young as flaunting his circumvention of the Church's doctrines:

When the people were dismissed, I observed to Mr. Young that these were a very happy set of people indeed, if they did not deceive themselves, which I hoped they did not. He seemed hurt at my observation, and replied, there was no danger of that. I told him, I hoped not, but I feared, if the like questions had been put to me, I could not have given such satisfactory answers as they all had done. Mr. Young said, perhaps madam, you have not sought the Lord in the same way they have.⁹¹

While it is Young here who is depicted as challenging the authority of the curate and his wife in their own parish, tensions between More and the clergy of

⁸⁹ Stott, p. 239.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 233.

⁹¹ Thomas Bere, *The Controversy between Mr.s Hannah More, and the Curate of Blagdon; relative to the conduct of her teacher of the Sunday school in that parish; with the original letters, and explanatory notes*, (London: J. S. Jordan, 1801), p.10.

the Mendips informed all of her charity there. Describing her charge at the feast of the Cheddar club in 1793, Martha More wrote,

Our *charge* now became an awkward thing, as it was not very pleasant – and I am sure it was not very polite (but I am certain it was very true) – to stand up and roar aloud, before vicar and curate, that the church was empty till we came to Cheddar.⁹²

Thus even as Hannah More and Thomas Bere argue over the conduct of Young, their arguments should be read as debates between two powerful influences in the parish over the right for ultimate authority. The Blagdon Controversy was more than a dispute over ‘the degree to which laymen might participate in certain aspects of the Church’s work’ as Thomas Laqueur maintains, or even more than a misogynist argument fuelled by More’s gender as Tobin asserts.⁹³ Rather, the conflict embodied clergy resentment of the interference and domination of women like More in their parish, as well as encapsulated fears of Methodism and enthusiasm that at once symbolised female emotional excess, but also seemed to typify the religious fervour of the ‘sectaries of the English Civil War’ and the revolutionary energies of the French.⁹⁴ Issues of order, hierarchy and space were therefore paramount to the Blagdon Controversy as it escalated and spilled over into the public consciousness. Following Mitzi Myers’ injunction to ‘look at the terrain’ of Blagdon ‘in terms of ground rules and social maps’, the Blagdon Controversy reveals the fraught tensions inherent in the female philanthropist’s claiming of the parish for her maternal charity, as the maternalist ‘ethic of

⁹² Martha More, p. 86.

⁹³ Laqueur, p. 75; Tobin, p. 111.

⁹⁴ Jon Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation: Poetics and the Policing of Culture in the Romantic Period*, (Oxford: OUP, 2003), p. 9.

responsibility and nurturance’ rubbed up against ‘traditional patriarchal mentalities’.⁹⁵

Henry Thompson emphasises his unwillingness to discuss Blagdon even as he raises the issue in his biography: ‘With the opening of the nineteenth century, the biographer of Hannah More enters on the only unpleasant portion of his duty; but a portion it is, and, therefore, cannot be evaded.’⁹⁶ By underlining his personal discomfort with the events of Blagdon and once again inserting himself into the narrative of More’s life, Thompson reveals a latent anxiety about More’s conduct throughout the affair, but also his sense of connection to the dispute – as a member of the clergy it is evident that he feels these issues of authority, Methodism and Evangelicalism strongly. Indeed, even though Thompson insists on the ‘mild, calm, and conciliatory’ behaviour of More throughout the entire debate, therefore appearing to subscribe to what Stott has described as the traditional narrative of More’s supporters ‘of a blameless Christian woman set upon by malignant enemies’, he also refuses to take sides in the initial argument – an act that both strives to separate the biographer from the ecclesiastical controversies of the early 1800s, but also seems to hint at criticisms of More’s conduct in Bere’s parish.⁹⁷ While More landed herself in controversy, Thompson is desperate to avoid it himself:

The object of this chapter shall be the barest and simplest possible statement of uncontroverted facts, without the smallest attempt to adjust the balance of ‘the Blagdon controversy.’ In adopting this line, I am not influenced by the belief that Mrs. More was wrong. That question is here undetermined. [...] The reader will find no facts here specified but such as are admitted by those who advocated each side of the question; a

⁹⁵ Myers, ‘A Peculiar Protection’, pp. 231-32.

⁹⁶ Henry Thompson, *Hannah More*, p. 179.

⁹⁷ Henry Thompson, *Hannah More*, p. 190; Stott, p. 240.

question which should never have been adverted to, were it, in the opinion of the writer, possible altogether to decline it.

Later in the chapter, Thompson offers further evidence of his ambivalence towards More's conduct and association with Methodism, as he refuses to defend or condemn his subject:

Three questions, utterly distinct, were involved in this debate. The conduct of Mr. Bere; the conduct of Mrs. More; and the character of her religious views. With the first of these, this volume is altogether unconcerned. The second, the reader must infer from the facts alone. The last is inseparable from the task of the biographer; but even here he is under no necessity of stirring the embers of that frightful feud.⁹⁸

In refusing to provide his perspective on Blagdon, Thompson turns to the 'uncontroverted facts' of the story, thereby seeking to provide an uncontroversial account of the controversy. Yet embedded within the biographer's 'simplest possible statement' of the events is an implicit assumption that More did exceed her authority in Blagdon – both in hiring a Methodist teacher for her school, and then for defying its curate. This assumption can be traced in the images of enthusiasm and regulation that characterise Thompson's account, as More's influence – like Young's extempore prayers – moves beyond its allotted bounds in the parish. This is despite the fact that Thompson constantly removes More from all the action in his narrative, and focuses on her male representatives in the affair. Thus although it is Young whose behaviour is defined by Thompson as 'enthusiastick [sic] and sectarian', by placing her trust in the wrong representative, it is More who is punished, as she forced to dismiss her schoolmaster and ultimately close her school by a 'local tribunal' of 'five magistrates, three clergymen, and three private gentlemen'. As Thompson quotes

⁹⁸ Henry Thompson, *Hannah More*, pp. 179-80; pp. 189-90.

from More's address to her pupils on the closure of her Blagdon school, the emphasis is upon regulation, as More's own reputation for pious femininity is seen to depend upon the orderly conduct of the villagers:

I do not wish to inflame, but to compose and reconcile you; your business is not to dispute, but to *submit*. You will give the best proof that you have profited by our instructions and those of your master by carrying the religion you have been taught on Sunday into the business of the week.⁹⁹

More is then seen to place her trust in a group of male friends, both to advise her over the affair and to defend her against Bere's allegations. This again, has the effect of distancing More from the argument as it entered the public arena of the *Anti-Jacobin Review* and the *British Critic*, amongst others. Thompson's insistence that throughout the debate, which was increasing daily in its virulence, More 'put forth no publick [sic] defences or refutations', can be read as a deliberate strategy here, since it is evident from More's letters that she was active in seeking support from Church authority figures, as well as wrote and helped circulate the document the *Statement of Facts*, which defended and promoted her cause whilst criticising Bere.¹⁰⁰ As Mitzi Myers comments, it is certain that Thompson had access to some of these letters during the writing of his biography (in particular, More's numerous letters to her 'public champion' T. S. Whalley), as did More's earlier memoirist William Roberts, although neither include these letters in their narratives of the event.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 184-85.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p. 190. For More's behind the scenes role in her public defence see Stott, pp. 248-50.

¹⁰¹ Myers, 'A Peculiar Protection', p. 242.

Yet in stressing More's distance from the public dimension of the Blagdon Controversy, Thompson also implies again a lack of regulation on the philanthropist's part, as she is depicted as allowing her friends to discuss Bere and the Sunday school without any restraint: 'Mrs. More put forth no publick [sic] defences or refutations; she never interfered to check injudicious friends, or to censure calumnious enemies.'¹⁰² Although the biographer continues to uphold the 'saintly' conduct of his subject throughout the ordeal, there is also a sense of events spiralling out of control, as More's private disagreement with Bere comes into contact with her civic and public identities – both in the form of her political friends and her public reputation as a writer and reformer of national morals. Thompson's quotations from More's 'respectable antagonists', as well as from her 'impure' critics, thus works to reprimand the female philanthropist for her public exposure whilst also illustrating to his readers the dangers awaiting women in the public sphere: 'One was so degraded as to post a bill at the turnpike at Blagdon, in which the Misses More and their friends were *advertised* in the character of a menagerie.' Notably, More's 'impure' critics are described as 'disgusting' to 'every decent and well-regulated mind', thereby adding – somewhat obliquely - to this sense of wild abandonment and enthusiasm surrounding More's public persona. Yet it is clear that even as Thompson claims to be disgusted by some of the wilder attacks on More's name, the stability of his narrative also depends on their inclusion, since by focusing on such ludicrous allegations as More '*had been concerned with Charlotte Corday in the assassination of Marat!*' (Thompson's italics), the biographer is also able to undermine the criticisms aimed at More and her philanthropy by the *Anti-*

¹⁰² Henry Thompson, *Hannah More*, p. 190.

Jacobin Review, which crucially, Thompson does not explore.¹⁰³ As Thompson describes the Blagdon Controversy, he thus veers between implicit concerns about More's excessive authority and presence in parochial and public spheres, and a desire to maintain his quiet, pious and wholly feminine vision of Hannah More.

Embedded within even the more ridiculous claims about More, legitimate challenges to Thompson's representation of the philanthropist endure however, which gesture to a more complex version of More and her charity. As Myers comments,

if the opposition's wildest slurs – prostitution, murder, treason, reactionary warmongering as Pitt's hireling – cancel out, they yet leave a residue of charges that demand further investigation, charges quite at variance with the classic biographic, or rather hagiographic, portrayal of More the saintly victim of unmerited persecution.¹⁰⁴

This 'residue of charges' is palpable in Thompson's reference to an accusation about More and bribery: 'One of her most violent assailants does not hesitate to call her liberality to the school-children in the distribution of food and clothing by the gravely-sounding names of "bribery and corruption!"'¹⁰⁵ Thompson does not name his source but his excerpt is taken from *Truths, Respecting Mrs.*

Hannah More's Meeting-Houses, and the conduct of her followers; addressed to the Curate of Blagdon by Edward Spencer, published in 1802. Clearly Spencer's depiction of More as hypocritical and self-publicising verges into the excessive – he opens with describing More's 'Machiavellian' machinations and her 'Crocodile' tears – but his representation of More as dominating the parish and

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 192-94.

¹⁰⁴ Myers, 'A Peculiar Protection', p. 241.

¹⁰⁵ Henry Thompson, *Hannah More*, p. 193.

‘drawing’ the clergy into her ‘petticoat’, as well as using feasts, food and clothing to persuade children and parents to support her charities is supported (although presented differently) by Martha More’s casual references to ‘bribes’ in the *Mendip Annals*.¹⁰⁶ Both Edward Spencer’s and Martha More’s versions of Hannah More thus come into contact with Thompson’s narrative during his account of the Blagdon Controversy and threaten to unsettle his already fraught depiction of the female philanthropist.

Having waded through this problematic list of accusations and counter-accusations about More and her philanthropy, Thompson thus retreats from the controversy by closing his chapter on Blagdon with a letter from More to Dr. Beadon, who became the Bishop of Bath and Wells in 1802. This letter restores order to Thompson’s narrative, since it acts as the final word on More’s philanthropy and the events at Blagdon, but also because it observes the hierarchy of the parish, as More moves away from the advice of friendly politicians and public figures to submitting wholly to the authority of the bishop. Presenting his subject as humiliated and chastened by the publicity of the Blagdon affair, Thompson uses this letter of More’s to put her in her place:

If it should be your will that my remaining schools should be abolished, I may lament your decision, but I will obey it. My deep reverence for the laws and institutions of my country inspires me with a proportionable veneration for all instituted authorities, whether in Church or State. If I am not permitted to employ the short remnant of a life which has been nearly destroyed by these reiterated attacks, in being, in my small measure and degree, actively useful, I will at least set my accusers an example of profound obedience to those superiors whom the providence of God has set over me, and whom, next to Him, I am bound to obey.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Edward Spencer, *Truths, Respecting Mrs Hannah More’s Meeting-Houses, and the conduct of her followers; addressed to the Curate of Blagdon*, (Bath: W. Meyler, 1802), p. 10; p. 12; p. 48; p. 53. See also Martha More, p. 36.

¹⁰⁷ Henry Thompson, *Hannah More*, p. 222.

More's pledge of obedience to the Church authorities is thus presented by Thompson as the conclusion of the Blagdon Controversy, and this image of an obedient More both secures Thompson's paternalist vision of female philanthropy, as well as banishes any other version of Hannah More to the margins of his narrative. Rather than commenting on More's excessive self-abasement in her letter to the bishop, Thompson approves of More's observation of parish hierarchies in his final statements of the chapter: 'To this affecting and dignified appeal the bishop gave a prompt and most satisfactory reply [...] and promised her every protection and encouragement for her Sunday schools.'¹⁰⁸ In Henry Thompson's vision of the female philanthropist and the parish, her work and influence is ultimately only secured through the clergyman's consent.

In maintaining the significance of Hannah More to successive generations of nineteenth-century women, this study is therefore maintaining the importance of More's message of parochial, maternal philanthropy to the gentlewoman – encapsulated in her writings and most especially in her long-running bestseller *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*, but also in her reputation as a philanthropist, who brought Sunday school education to the Mendips, as well as provided the poor with 'suitable' reading material in the form of *The Cheap Repository Tracts*. As Henry Thompson's biography illustrates, this reputation took on an even greater importance after More's death, which saw the complex life of Hannah More transformed into a fable of feminine domesticity, piety and humility for the Victorian female reader. Thus even as *Coelebs* insisted on the authority of the

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, p. 222.

gentlewoman to guide her parish, this sense of female power is diminished by More's own mythology. As Thompson's uneasy narration of the Blagdon Controversy demonstrates, female power in the local sphere did not go uncontested. It is with these tensions between the female philanthropist and the clergyman in mind that the discussion now turns to consider the parochial spaces of Charlotte Brontë's and Elizabeth Gaskell's writing.

Chapter Two

‘Extravagant Day-dreams’?

Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell

Sending her publisher George Smith the manuscript of her latest novel *Villette* in 1852, Charlotte Brontë commented,

You will see that ‘*Villette*’ touches on no matter of public interest. I cannot write books handling the topics of the day – it is of no use trying. Nor can I write a book for its moral – Nor can I take up a philanthropic scheme though I honour Philanthropy.¹

This view of Brontë and her fiction can also be seen in the letters of her friend and fellow writer Elizabeth Gaskell, who wrote in 1853 after the publications of *Villette* and her own novel *Ruth*,

The difference between Miss Brontë and me is that she puts all her naughtiness into her books, and I put all my goodness. I am sure she works off a great deal that is morbid *into* her writing, and *out* of her life; and my books are so far better than I am that I often feel ashamed of having written them and as if I were a hypocrite.²

Gaskell’s comparison of *Villette*, which documents the inner sufferings of its heroine Lucy Snowe, with *Ruth*, which focuses on society’s discrimination of ‘fallen women’, reinforces both her own and Brontë’s assessment of Brontë’s work as lacking a philanthropic moral. Yet this comparison ignores Brontë’s earlier engagement with ‘topics of the day’ and matters ‘of public interest’ in her

¹ Charlotte Brontë, ‘To George Smith, 30th October 1852’, in *The Brontës: A Life in Letters*, ed. by Juliet Barker, (London: Viking, 1997), p. 353. Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1853).

² Elizabeth Gaskell, ‘To Lady Kay-Shuttleworth, 7th April 1853’, in *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. by J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), pp. 227-30, (p. 228).

1849 novel *Shirley*, which examined both ‘the “condition of women” question’ and the tense relationship between the classes that had been so forcibly and recently underlined by the campaigns of the failed Chartist movement.³ Crucially, while Brontë claimed she struggled to write with a philanthropic scheme in mind, in *Shirley* she interacts with the vocation of philanthropy for the gentlewoman, and notions of female influence upon society as popularised by Hannah More. This interaction between Brontë and More brings new meaning to her father Patrick Brontë’s position as an Evangelical clergyman in Haworth, and the Brontë family’s distant connections with the Clapham Sect. Notably, William Wilberforce sponsored Patrick Brontë through university to enable Patrick to follow a career in the Church, both Wilberforce and Hannah More were patrons of the Clergy Daughters’ School at Cowan Bridge that the Brontë girls so tragically attended, and the works of Hannah More were read in the Brontë home.⁴ This chapter thus emphasises the significance of More and her maternalism to *Shirley*. In its examination of the connections between Charlotte Brontë and Hannah More it challenges Rosemarie Bodenheimer’s argument that ‘paternalism is an assumption central to Brontë’s imagination of human relations’.⁵ For although the world of *Shirley* is structured by paternalist methods of governance, Brontë is arguably more concerned with a *maternalist* narrative of society in her novel, as she explores its consequences upon the female

³ Charlotte Brontë, ‘To W. S. Williams, 12th May 1848’, in *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë, with a selection of letters by family and friends, Vol. II 1848-1851*, ed. by Margaret Smith, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), pp. 63-68, (p. 66).

⁴ For information about Patrick Brontë and William Wilberforce see Juliet Barker, *The Brontës*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994; repr. London: Abacus, 2010), p. 12. For a discussion of More and Cowan Bridge see Barker, *The Brontës*, p. 138, and for more information on the reading material of the Brontë family see Barker, *The Brontës*, p. 169.

⁵ Bodenheimer, p. 37.

individual, as well as its potentially fraught relationship with the nation's paternalist institutions.

Hannah More's famous claiming of the role of philanthropist for all gentlewomen can also be seen to have had a significant impact on Elizabeth Gaskell. Numerous critics of Gaskell have identified the philanthropic motivations behind her writing, as with her social protest novels *Mary Barton* (1848), *Ruth* (1853) and *North and South* (1855).⁶ In a letter to her friend Eliza Fox, Gaskell made explicit the moral concerns behind her writing: 'Wh. is *our* work; what *we* have to do in advancing the Kingdom of God [...] first we must [...] make it clear to ourselves, (that's *the* hard part) and then forget ourselves in our work, and our work in the End we ought to strive to bring about'.⁷ Likewise, in the novels themselves, Gaskell frequently used a philanthropic, maternal figure for her heroine, such as the nurse and young mother Ruth Hilton of *Ruth*, as well as the compassionate but imperious Margaret Hale of *North and South*, noted by both Catherine Gallagher and Rosemarie Bodenheimer as possessing the 'power [...] of a mother'.⁸ Yet more than just interacting with the maternalist narrative of Hannah More, after the publication of *Shirley*, Gaskell can also be seen to interact with the representation of female philanthropy found in Charlotte Brontë's novel – both critiquing Brontë's conception of women and charity, and finding herself in a sometimes uncomfortable (and unacknowledged) agreement with her friend. While this interaction is usually regarded in terms of the evident relationship between *Shirley* and *North and South*, this chapter extends the

⁶ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, (London: Chapman and Hall, 1848; repr. London: Penguin, 1985); *Ruth*, (London: Chapman and Hall, 1853); *North and South*.

⁷ Elizabeth Gaskell, 'To Eliza Fox, c. February 1850', in *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, pp. 106-107, (p. 107).

⁸ Gallagher, p. 169; see also Bodenheimer p. 65.

relationship to Gaskell's 1857 biography of Brontë *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* and more fully to her lesser-known novella *My Lady Ludlow*, printed in *Household Words* in 1858 and published in book form in 1859.⁹ These two texts see Gaskell return to the themes of *Shirley*, and whereas *North and South* can be read as a 'progressive' revision of Brontë's novel, both the later biography and novella are made anxious by *Shirley's* representation of the female philanthropist as a borderline, marginal figure in her community.¹⁰

Brontë and Gaskell are typically viewed as political opposites. Lucasta Miller's reading of their relationship in *The Brontë Myth* exemplifies the common position taken by scholars:

Despite their eventual friendship, the two were ideologically poles apart. [...] Charlotte's politics were Tory and aristocratic, and her Romantic aesthetic was introspective and individualistic. Gaskell, on the other hand, was a dissenter who came out of the Nonconformist tradition which still, at some vestigial level, had doubts about the morality of fiction *per se*, and certainly about fiction which did not have an improving purpose.¹¹

Indeed, both Brontë and Gaskell played up to their political differences, as Gaskell's letter to Charlotte Froude after first meeting Brontë demonstrates: 'She and I quarrelled & differed about almost every thing, - she calls me a democrat, & can not bear Tennyson - but we like each other heartily \I think/ & I hope we shall ripen into friends.'¹² Of course, there were many disparities between the women's politics, which reflect as much as their religious views as their thoughts on society, since to be a Unitarian as Gaskell was, almost inevitably ensured her

⁹ Gaskell, *My Lady Ludlow*, in *Round the Sofa*, pp. 13-340.

¹⁰ Bodenheimer, p. 53.

¹¹ Lucasta Miller, *The Brontë Myth*, (London: Jonathon Cape, 2001), p. 30.

¹² Elizabeth Gaskell, 'To Charlotte Froude, c. 25th August 1850', in *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, pp. 128-29, (p. 129.)

support of the Liberal party. Yet these disparities obscure the fact that there were also points of connection between the two women's political views. As Brontë wrote to Gaskell in 1851 after reading Harriet Taylor's anonymous article 'The Emancipation of Women', 'But why are you and I to think (perhaps I should rather say to feel) so exactly alike on some points that there can be no discussion between us? Your words on this paper express my thoughts.'¹³ These connections between Brontë and Gaskell emphasise the significance of the narrative of conservative reform to their politics but also to their novels. Charlotte Brontë, with her childhood obsession with the Duke of Wellington and her well-documented class snobbery, was indeed a Conservative by inclination, and yet as her writings testify, she was also concerned with the position of the gentlewoman in society and sought – somewhat ambiguously – reforms in female employment.¹⁴

Likewise, Elizabeth Gaskell, although committed to the Liberal party, frequently revealed herself to be uncomfortable with radical political solutions even to the extent of feeling apathetic towards the great cause of the day, American anti-slavery. She confessed to her friend Mary Green after a visit from the American abolitionist and feminist Maria Weston Chapman:

I am *very* fond of her, though I know nothing about abolition, & that great interest of hers [...] That night we had a sort of Anti-Slavery conference in the drawing-room and they sighed over my apathy, but I cannot get up an interest in the *measures* adopted by people so far away across the Atlantic.'¹⁵

¹³ Charlotte Brontë, 'To Elizabeth Gaskell, 20th September 1851', in *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë, Vol. II 1848-1851*, pp. 695-99, (p. 695). Gaskell's letter to Brontë on Taylor's article appears to have been lost.

¹⁴ For a discussion of Brontë's 'snobbery' see Barker, *The Brontës*, p. 723.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Gaskell, 'To Mary Green, 15th October 1855', quoted by Jenny Uglow in *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1993; repr. 1999), pp. 318-19.

Despite her friendships with many of the women documented by Kathryn Gleadle in *The Early Feminists: Radical Unitarians and the Emergence of the Women's Rights Movement, 1831-51*, Gaskell herself was no radical Unitarian, and in fact, had much sympathy with reforming conservatives such as her friend Caroline Davenport, whose Sunday school and philanthropy on her estate in Cheshire Gaskell describes vividly and affectionately in her letters.¹⁶

As suggested, the connections between Brontë's and Gaskell's politics are most evident in their fictional exploration of the female philanthropist and her sphere. Brontë's *Shirley* and Gaskell's *My Lady Ludlow* both illustrate the shifting sense of power possessed by the landed woman in her community, and Gaskell's text appears to explicitly communicate with her friend's vision of female authority and philanthropy. This dialogue is then supplemented and complicated if we consider Gaskell's biography of Charlotte Brontë, which reads as strongly influenced by *Shirley* in its depiction of Brontë and her relationship with the people of Haworth. By tracing the literary relationship between Gaskell and Brontë in these texts, this chapter seeks to contribute to, but also question, the usual path that leads from the publication of *Mary Barton* in 1848, to *Shirley* in 1849, to finally *North and South* in 1855. It challenges the widely held image of Elizabeth Gaskell as the 'liberal reviser' of Charlotte Brontë's works, pointing to instead, a far more complex and fluid relationship between the women and their writings.¹⁷ In doing so, it also draws attention to the significance of

¹⁶ Kathryn Gleadle, *The Early Feminists: Radical Unitarians and the Emergence of the Women's Rights Movement, 1831-51*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1995). For Gaskell's friendship with Caroline Davenport see *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, pp. 149-50 and *Further Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. by John Chapple and Alan Shelston, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 61-64.

¹⁷ Bodenheimer, p. 23.

Gaskell's shorter fictional pieces, which are usually disregarded in favour of her novels. The disjointed publication history of *My Lady Ludlow* both illustrates and partly explains this disregard. First published in *Household Words* in 1858, the text was then republished the following year with an additional narrative framing device in the collection of Gaskell's shorter pieces *Round the Sofa*, before being brought out in another collection by Brontë's publishers Smith, Elder and Co., *My Lady Ludlow and Other Tales* also in 1859.¹⁸ Although a version of *My Lady Ludlow and Other Stories* was brought out by Oxford World Classics in 1989, it since appears to have fallen out of print and has not received the critical treatment given to some of Gaskell's other fictional pieces such as 'Lois the Witch', which was edited by Laura Kranzler for Penguin's collection of Gaskell's 'gothic' fiction *Gothic Tales* in 2000, and *Cousin Phillis*, which was edited for Oxford World Classics in 2010 by Heather Glen.¹⁹

In emphasising the complexity of *My Lady Ludlow* I stress the importance of Gaskell's rural and provincial texts both to our understanding of Gaskell as a writer and to the literary culture of the mid-nineteenth-century. Yet, as the recent BBC adaptation of *Cranford* illustrates, these texts are typically viewed as twee or inconsequential when compared with the works of Gaskell set in northern factory towns.²⁰ While Gaskell's shorter pieces of fiction are attracting new critical attention, the fact that the works of interest are her ghost stories or social texts reveals our bias towards a certain kind of conflict in women's writing – a conflict that is frequently sexual or psychological and

¹⁸ I am using the 1859 version of *My Lady Ludlow* from *Round the Sofa*.

¹⁹ See Elizabeth Gaskell, *Gothic Tales*, ed. by Laura Kranzler, (London: Penguin, 2000), and *Cousin Phillis and Other Stories*, ed. by Heather Glen, (Oxford: OUP, 2010).

²⁰ *Cranford*, dir. by Simon Curtis and Steve Hudson (BBC, 2007).

located in an urban environment. *My Lady Ludlow* does not contain these kinds of tensions, and is set in a seemingly static rural community in the early nineteenth century. But in its depiction of the power of the Lady Bountiful, it is as complex in its discussion of the relationship between women and nineteenth-century society, as Gaskell's urban fiction.

Shirley, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* and *My Lady Ludlow* all illustrate the significance of the parochial sphere to middle- and upper-class female identities in the mid-nineteenth century. As with *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* and *The Life of Hannah More*, the local community becomes a space for Brontë and Gaskell to imagine and represent the influence of the gentlewoman, via methods of charity. The main texts of this chapter, *Shirley* and *My Lady Ludlow* both use a historical setting to explore the implications of women's parochial influence and notably, each text is located in the early nineteenth century – the era of Hannah More and the setting of *Coelebs*. Brontë examines the Luddite riots of the years 1811-1812, while Gaskell opts for 1805, although her narrative also reaches back to the French Revolution. For Brontë and Gaskell, this return to the recent past stresses the continuities between the world of Hannah More and the concerns of the 1840s and 1850s, as well as underlines the relevance of More's narrative of female philanthropy to the lives of Victorian gentlewomen. Reflecting their contrasting political positions, Brontë and Gaskell represent this connection differently, as Brontë uses *Shirley's* themes of class conflict and the Woman Question to demonstrate how little has changed between the Luddite riots of 1811 and the Chartist uprisings of 1848-1849, whereas Gaskell works to link the philanthropy of Lady Ludlow – the Hannah More figure of her tale – to the progress and reforms of the present day. Thus while *Shirley* argues that nothing

has changed, *My Lady Ludlow* insists that everything has. Yet despite this central difference, both texts struggle to maintain the position of their female philanthropists in their communities. As with *The Life of Hannah More*, the philanthropic heroines of Brontë and Gaskell are undermined by the men of the parochial sphere, and with Gaskell in particular, the issue of progress comes to threaten her affirmative image of local female power: the Lady Bountiful Lady Ludlow.

If this characterisation of *Shirley*'s representation of female philanthropy emphasises Brontë's pessimistic view of history and society, it is also important to recognise the inconsistencies in Brontë's 'Tory pessimism', as she fluctuates between criticising and celebrating conventional Hannah More style philanthropy.²¹ While many of Brontë's critiques of female philanthropy are explored via the character of Caroline Helstone, the arrival of the landed Shirley Keeldar into the story also enables Brontë to draw on the sort of power Hannah More experienced in her neighbourhood, as Brontë connects Shirley's local authority with female charity. That both Caroline and Shirley ultimately struggle with their philanthropic roles does not deny the possibility for gentlewomen to achieve influence in the local sphere, but it does reveal Brontë's issues with the narrative of maternalism that exists at the heart of such ideas about female philanthropic influence. Unmarried for most of her life and having struggled as a teacher, Brontë's letters reveal a marked scepticism about both the ability of the gentlewoman to naturally inspire goodness in others, and the angelic innocence

²¹ Lucasta Miller, 'Introduction', in *Shirley*, Charlotte Brontë, (London: Penguin, 2006), pp. xi-xxxii, (p. xix).

of children – something that Gaskell drew particular attention to in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*.

In 1839, whilst working as a governess to the Sidgwick family Brontë wrote to her sister Emily, ‘The children are constantly with me, and more riotous, perverse, unmanageable cubs never grew. As for correcting them, I soon quickly found that was entirely out of the question: they are to do as they like.’ Lest Brontë’s antipathy towards her charges be regarded as an individual case, it is notable that in 1841 whilst working for a new family, Brontë wrote to her friend Ellen Nussey:

Somehow I have managed to get a good deal more control over the children lately – This makes my life a good deal easier – Also by dint of nursing the fat baby it has got to know me & be fond of me – occasionally I suspect myself of growing rather fond of it – but this suspicion clears away the moment its mamma takes it & makes a fool of it – from a bonny, rosy little morsel – it sinks in my estimation into a small, petted nuisance – Ditto with regard to the other children.²²

Hannah More’s figure of the naturally maternal female philanthropist was therefore seemingly always going to be a problematic image for Brontë to adhere to. Brontë’s account of the female philanthropist constantly shifts between describing the benevolent maternalism of the Sunday school teacher and documenting the repression and scorn experienced by maiden philanthropists – a shift that underlines the female philanthropist’s borderline status in the world of *Shirley*. Although in one sense Beth Fowkes Tobin is thus correct to see Brontë as conveying a strong ‘sense of futility’ in her depiction of female philanthropy,

²² Charlotte Brontë, ‘To Emily Brontë, 8 June 1839’, in *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë, with a selection of letters by friends and family, Vol. I 1829-1847*, ed. by Margaret Smith, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 190-93, (pp. 190-91); Charlotte Brontë, ‘To Ellen Nussey, 24 May 1841’, in *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë, Vol. I*, pp. 252-54, (p. 253).

Tobin's argument misses the nuances and fluctuations in Brontë's representation, as *Shirley* produces a picture of the female philanthropist in her community that alternates between influence and despair.²³

In her life and writings Elizabeth Gaskell appears much more comfortable with the narrative of social maternalism central to nineteenth-century conceptions of female philanthropy. As Gallagher has also noted, female power is by necessity, maternal power for Gaskell.²⁴ It is notable that upon meeting Florence Nightingale, Gaskell argued with her about Nightingale's wish to raise all children in state-run crèches – philanthropy on such an impersonal level had no appeal for Gaskell.²⁵ As will be seen, Gaskell represented female charity as intimate, caring and emotionally fulfilling. Her image of the philanthropic heroine is thus frequently a positive one, especially when compared with the ambivalent depiction presented by her friend Charlotte Brontë. Nonetheless, Gaskell's vision of maternal philanthropy is troubled by its own anxieties. These anxieties can be seen to an extent in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, as Gaskell's text struggles to apply the image of the maternal philanthropist to the female author, and nervously considers the possibility that the ideal of woman's influence is almost impossible for the unmarried woman to achieve. This uncertainty is notably absent from Gaskell's fictional treatment of female philanthropy in *My Lady Ludlow*, first published in *Household Words* one year later. Gaskell's depiction of Lady Ludlow – a philanthropic female landowner - offers a more assured version of Brontë's Shirley Keeldar, as Lady

²³ Tobin, p. 126.

²⁴ Gallagher, p. 169; see also Uglow in explicit reference to *My Lady Ludlow* and maternal power, p. 469.

²⁵ Elizabeth Gaskell, 'To Emily Shaen, 27th October 1854', in *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, pp. 316-21, (p. 320).

Ludlow exercises a powerful and benevolent authority over her estate and village. It would thus appear that in her fictional versions of female philanthropy Gaskell is able to imagine the successful ‘rule’ of a maternal figure in a way that is impossible for her in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*.

Yet *My Lady Ludlow* also recognises the borderline status of its heroine, since as with *The Life of Hannah More* and *Shirley*, the power of the Lady Bountiful comes under question from the clergy. A more pressing question for Gaskell’s text however, is the place of her female philanthropist in a society that is rapidly changing. While Gaskell’s connection of the early nineteenth-century with the late 1850s on one level urges the role of female philanthropy in the century’s progress, thereby underlining the continued significance of More’s narrative of conservative reform, the historical setting of *My Lady Ludlow* also renders the female philanthropist a marginal character, as we see reforms in education and tolerance of dissenters erode the authority of the Lady Bountiful over her community. Hence although the power of Lady Ludlow challenges Brontë’s pessimistic vision of women, authority and the parochial sphere, Gaskell’s novella simultaneously remains uncertain about the position of such a female philanthropist in an age of reform – leaving her Lady Bountiful on the borderland between the past and the present.

In *Borderline Citizens*, Kathryn Gleadle comments on the tendency of historians to neglect rural and conservative females in their studies of women and politics in the nineteenth century, and calls for an extension in the scope of investigation ‘to include a range of conservative political traditions’.²⁶ Both

²⁶ Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens*, p. 21.

Gleadle's critique and her emphasis on the importance of conservatism to nineteenth-century womanhood are also extremely relevant to literary scholarship. This is demonstrated by the argument of Susan Zlotnick in *Women, Writing, and the Industrial Revolution* that 'women writers were more likely to look to the future with hope' than their male contemporaries, and that Brontë and Gaskell in particular, were progressive supporters of the Industrial Revolution and 'readily welcomed the factory world' – connecting 'women's liberation to the liberating effects of industrial capitalism'.²⁷ As Lucasta Miller reveals in her introduction to the Penguin edition of *Shirley*, Zlotnick's depiction of Brontë is a common one, as the author's 'reputation for feminism has [...] led to the mistaken assumption that her standpoint on class relations should automatically be a liberal one'.²⁸ Clearly this desire to read nineteenth-century women writers as wholly liberal and progressive is extremely reductive and neglects the important fluctuations between conservatism and reform found in the works of authors like Brontë and Gaskell, and in the texts examined in this chapter. In *Shirley* and *My Lady Ludlow* in particular, Brontë and Gaskell can be seen to build on a conservative reform tradition to imagine empowered philanthropic heroines, and in their fantasies of female landowners, both writers draw on the possibilities and limitations of female power in the parochial sphere.

Charlotte Brontë

Shirley (1849)

²⁷ Susan Zlotnick, *Women, Writing, and the Industrial Revolution*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp. 1-2; p. 9.

²⁸ Miller, 'Introduction', p. xix.

Shirley begins with a community in discord. Luddites are threatening to attack the property of the mill owner Robert Moore, the Reverend Helstone arms his curate with pistols and addresses him with ‘the air of a veteran officer’ more ‘than of a venerable priest’, and the local curates themselves reject their parish duties in favour of visiting each other and arguing about ‘minute points of ecclesiastical discipline, frivolities which seemed empty as bubbles to all save themselves’.²⁹ This lack of connection between the curates Malone, Sweeting and Donne and their parishioners is keenly satirised by Brontë throughout *Shirley*, and is offered as one reason for the conflict between the classes that is disrupting local society. The curates of the present day, Brontë tells her reader, ‘ought to be doing a great deal of good’, but it is evident that in their neglect of the schools and the sick, Malone, Sweeting and Donne in the years of 1811-1812 certainly aren’t.³⁰ Famously, Brontë’s publishers Smith, Elder and Co. objected to her representation of the curates when shown a version of the novel in draft form and suggested that the passage should be removed before publication. Brontë’s response to this suggestion demonstrates – as Beth Fowkes Tobin also notes – her pessimistic assessment of the role played by the clergy in their community:

I sincerely thank you both for the candid expression of your objections – what you say with reference to the first chapter shall be duly weighed – At present I feel reluctant to withdraw it – because as I formerly said of the Lowood-part of ‘Jane Eyre’ – it is true – The curates and their ongoing are merely photographed from the life.³¹

²⁹ Brontë, *Shirley*, p. 13; p. 9.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 5.

³¹ Charlotte Brontë, ‘To William Smith Williams, c. 10th February 1849’, in *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë, Vol. II*, pp. 181-83, (p. 181). See also Beth Fowkes Tobin, p. 126.

According to their own testimonies, when Hannah and Martha More discovered the clergy's dereliction of duty in the Mendips, the two sisters instantly set about filling the void with their own philanthropy and maternal influence. In *Shirley* however, Brontë reveals her dubious response to this narrative of the gentlewoman's benevolent power, as her heroines Caroline Helstone and Shirley Keeldar both struggle to take up the duties of the negligent curates and to make these duties effective when confronted with poverty and class hatred. This disconnect between the work of the clergy and the charity of the gentlewoman is underlined by the delayed entrance of Caroline into the opening narrative - not appearing until Chapter Five and long after Brontë's discussion of the curates and the problems of the community (Shirley of course, hasn't moved to the neighbourhood yet). Caroline's position underlines how rather than contesting the curates for influence in the parochial sphere, the women of *Shirley* frequently find themselves sidelined and subordinated by the men, as Caroline's uncle, the military-minded Reverend Helstone segregates even her conversation topics: 'Slight topics alone might be discussed between them; for with a woman – a girl – Mr. Helstone would touch on no other.'³² Shut out from meaningful discussions of local issues and politics, Caroline's charity is initially depicted by Brontë as just as slight as her chats with Helstone, since the vicar's niece has no way of relating her traditional philanthropic obligations to larger social questions.

³² Brontë, *Shirley*, p. 97.

This lack of power Caroline and the other women of her class maintain in their neighbourhood is illustrated by the trivial nature of the charity the women undertake, such as ‘the Jew’s basket’ that Caroline is obligated to knit children’s socks for. As Brontë explains to ‘those who are not “au fait” to the mysteries of the “Jew-basket”’, every month the basket is passed between the women of the community and it becomes their responsibility to add to the ‘monster collection of pincushions, needle-books, card-racks, work-bags, articles of infant wear, &c, &c’ and then sell them on for ‘prices unblushing exorbitant’ in order to raise money for the conversion of the Jews and ‘the regeneration of the interesting coloured population of the globe’. Rather than transforming the society around them and ameliorating the condition of their poor neighbours, the gentlewomen of *Shirley* exercise their seeming influence over the missionary sphere – crucially a space beyond their reach or knowledge. That the Jew’s basket in fact offers women a *fantasy* of power as opposed to real charitable influence is underlined by Caroline’s lack of enthusiasm for the scheme, which reveals the work as a futile use of her time and talents: ‘if she had possessed plenty of money, she would rather, when it was brought to the rectory – an awful incubus! – have purchased the whole stock, than contributed a single pincushion’.³³ Caroline’s loathing of the Jew-basket is contrasted with the pleasure that her neighbour Mrs. Sykes and her daughters take in its contents, as well as with the excitement that they derive from fundraising for the cause:

An exciting time it is when that turn comes round: some active-minded women, with a good trading spirit, like it, and enjoy exceedingly the fun of making hard-handed worsted-spinners cash up, for articles quite useless to them; other – feebler souls object to it, and would rather see the prince of darkness himself at their door any morning, than that phantom

³³ *Ibid*, p. 108.

basket, brought with 'Mrs. Rouse's compliments, and please, ma'am, she says it's your turn now.'³⁴

Both in contributing to the stock of the basket and in selling this stock on to their reluctant friends and acquaintances, women like the Sykes' indulge in a fantasy of their power as missionaries, as well as engage in a whimsical version of the marketplace, where in contrast to the men of *Shirley* who deal with real trade and real economics, they merely mimic the behaviour of tradesmen and pursue inflated prices all in the name of charity. The fantasy element of this female trade is underscored by the analysis of the actual tradesman Robert Moore, who cuts through the Jew-basket's pretence of charity with conventional anti-Semitism and cynicism: 'Jew's basket be – sold! Never was utensil better named. Anything more Jewish than it – its contents, and their prices - cannot be conceived'.³⁵ Reinforcing their disempowered position in their community, gentlewomen therefore play at charity in their imagined versions of the marketplace and the mission, leaving the governance of the parochial sphere entirely to the judgement of the clergy and the mill owners.

Yet if Brontë is scathing of the Jew-basket and the pretences women engage in under the name of charity, it is still philanthropy that Caroline turns to once she believes she has lost her dreamed of future as Robert Moore's wife. That Brontë – despite her critique – can only offer charity work as the solution to her heroine's lack of vocation is at the heart of the complex depiction of female philanthropy in *Shirley* and Brontë's conflicted view of the single gentlewoman

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 109.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 71.

in her society. Thus while in one sense Rosemarie Bodenheimer is correct in reading *Shirley* as a complication and undermining of the romance and fantasies associated with *paternal* philanthropy, this argument fails to recognise Brontë's more complex interaction with the narrative of *maternal* philanthropy in her novel, as the author both exposes maternalism as a myth and finds herself reproducing its ideologies.³⁶ This tension can be seen in the character of Caroline, who when contemplating a life without Moore and her seeming future as an old maid asks, 'What was I created for, I wonder? Where is my place in the world?' From her experience, Caroline knows that the answer for an unmarried woman is in the care of others – something that she believes is as hypocritical as the charade of the Jew-basket:

I perceive that certain sets of human beings are very apt to maintain that other sets should give up their lives to them and their service, and then they requite them by praise: they call them devoted and virtuous. Is this enough? Is it to live? Is there not a terrible hollowness, mockery, want, craving, in that existence which is given away to others, for want of something of your own to bestow it on? I suspect there is. Does virtue lie in abnegation of self? I do not believe it. Undue humility makes tyranny; weak concession creates selfishness.³⁷

Unlike the example offered by Hannah More, Caroline seemingly resists the ideology of maternalist philanthropy, and rather than regarding it as elevating woman's place in society, sees it as a poor, mocking substitute for the role of wife and mother with 'something of your own' to bestow love and care upon. Crucially, the maternalist route of More and her ilk cannot cater to Caroline's emotional needs. The emotional inadequacy of maternal philanthropy was also

³⁶ Bodenheimer, p. 23.

³⁷ Brontë, *Shirley*, p. 169.

emphasised by Brontë in a letter to William Smith Williams during the writing of *Shirley*, as she pondered the life of the single woman isolated from rearing and educating a ‘little family’ and supposed that ‘she must do what she can – live as she can – complain as little - bear as much – work as well as possible’ but ‘when Patience has done its utmost and Industry its best [...] when both are baffled and Pain and Want <both> triumphant – the Sufferer is free – is entitled – at last to send up to Heaven any piercing cry for relief’.³⁸ The ‘piercing cry’ of the suffering single woman in Brontë’s letter anticipates Caroline Helstone’s nervous breakdown brought about by the emotional void of her existence. It also gives the lie to the apparent satisfaction found in maternal philanthropy, thereby supporting Lucasta Miller’s assessment of *Shirley* as a rebellious assertion of ‘women’s erotic nature’ as much as – if not more than - a ‘feminist call to arms’ for ‘creative or professional fulfilment’.³⁹

Despite Caroline’s criticisms of philanthropy however, she still sets out to visit the two old maid philanthropists of her neighbourhood, Miss Ainley and Miss Mann, in order to understand how best to approach her own future. These two visits are framed by a narrative tension between asserting the goodness of the women and their charity, and an emphasis on their insignificant position in an ungrateful, superficial society, along with an insistence on the barren reality of these women’s lives and works. Before Caroline departs to see Miss Mann, even she is seen to have participated in the dismissive treatment of the two women: ‘Till now, Caroline had always unhesitatingly declared she disliked [Miss Mann], and more than once she had joined her cousin Robert in laughing at some

³⁸ Brontë, ‘To W. S. Williams, 12th May 1848’, in *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë, Vol. II*, p. 66.

³⁹ Miller, ‘Introduction’, p. xxviii.

of her peculiarities.’ Yet after her visit, Caroline comes to understand the loneliness and suffering behind Miss Mann’s cantankerous behaviour: ‘The loneliness of her condition struck her visitor in a new light; as did also the character of her ugliness, - a bloodless pallor of complexion, and deeply worn lines of feature. The girl pitied the solitary and afflicted woman’. Moved by the woman’s condition, Caroline makes a new pledge to ‘never again to make light of her peculiarities or to laugh at her plainness; and, above all things, not to neglect her, but to come once a-week, and to offer her, from one human heart at least, the homage of affection and respect’.⁴⁰ With this pledge, Caroline can be seen to extend her philanthropic duties of Sunday school teaching and missionary fund raising to include female visiting. She thus increasingly subscribes to the tradition of maternalist philanthropy seen in both *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* and *The Life of Hannah More*.

Unlike More’s philanthropy however, Caroline’s visit is to another woman of her own class, although admittedly an impoverished one. This transformation of the old maid into the recipient of female charity emphasises where Brontë’s sympathies lie throughout *Shirley*, as lonely gentlewomen supplant the poor as individuals most deserving of consideration. Likewise, the transformation of the female philanthropist into the insignificant old maid exposes the vulnerable position of women in the local community and the borderline aspect of their influence. Thus even if Caroline seemingly and suddenly resembles the character of Lucilla Stanley at the end of this visit, Miss Mann’s lesson for Caroline about the reality of life as an unmarried female is stark and uncompromising:

⁴⁰ Brontë, *Shirley*, p. 171; p. 174; p. 175.

Communicative on her own affairs she usually was not, because no one cared to listen to her; but today she became so, and her confidant shed tears as she heard her speak: for she told of cruel, slow-wasting, obstinate sufferings. [...] Caroline found that the old maid had been a most devoted daughter and sister, an unwearied watcher by lingering deathbeds; that to prolonged and unrelaxing attendance on the sick, the malady that now poisoned her own life owed its origin; that to one wretched relative she had been a support and succour in the depths of self-earned degradation, and that it was still her hand which kept him from utter destitution.⁴¹

Whilst simultaneously venerating Miss Mann's good works: 'Miss Mann was rather to be admired for her fortitude than blamed for moroseness', Brontë makes it plain that these same good works – Miss Mann's selfless devotion – have 'poisoned her own life' and rendered her 'starved' of real love and affection, and as Beth Fowkes Tobin comments, conveys a strong 'sense of futility when describing [these] women's charitable efforts.'⁴² Caroline's visits may thus provide an emotional release for Miss Mann, but there is little doubt of the consequences for Caroline's own personal fulfilment if she carries out a similar plan of selfless devotion to others.

Nevertheless, Caroline returns from Miss Mann feeling 'much better for the visit'. She then proceeds the following day, to carry out a similar exercise with the old maid Miss Ainley. Different to Miss Mann, Miss Ainley's devotion extends out from her family members to all of the poor in their community. Once again, Brontë insists on the respect due to the unappreciated Miss Ainley and draws a distinction between her works of charity and the hypocrisy of the Jew-basket: 'She was religious – a professor of religion – what some would call "a saint"', and she referred to religion often in sanctioned phrase [...] Let those who cannot nicely, and with certainty, discern the difference between the tones of

⁴¹ *Ibid*, pp. 174-75.

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 174; p. 175; Tobin, p. 126.

hypocrisy and those of sincerity, never presume to laugh at all, lest they should have the miserable misfortune to laugh in the wrong place.' Miss Ainley is similarly selfless, and her selflessness is closely linked to her philanthropy:

Not from Miss Ainley's own lips did Caroline hear of her good works; but she knew much of them nevertheless: her beneficence was the familiar topic of the poor in Briarfield. They were not works of almsgiving: the old maid was too poor to give much, though she straitened herself to privation that she might contribute her mite when needful: they were the works of a Sister of Charity, far more difficult to perform than those of a Lady Bountiful. She would watch by any sickbed: she seemed to fear no disease; she would nurse the poorest whom none else would nurse: she was serene, humble, kind, and equable through everything.⁴³

Thus inspired by Miss Ainley's goodness, Caroline offers her assistance in helping the woman carry out her schemes of charity and is given by Miss Ainley both visiting and sewing work for the poor to do. Anxious to avoid her emotional despair at the loss of Moore's affections, Caroline uses her work for Miss Ainley to structure her life into one of social usefulness and activity in behaviour that is again reminiscent of the active usefulness of Evangelical heroines like Lucilla Stanley. Yet the discord between the goodness of women like Miss Mann and Miss Ainley and an insistence on their emotionally repressed lives remains, as the poor are shown to be ungrateful of Miss Ainley's kindness and Caroline continues to be apprehensive of her new life of selfless charity and devotion: 'It is true, she still felt with pain that the life which made Miss Ainley happy could not make her happy: pure and active as it was, in her heart she deemed it deeply dreary because it was so loveless – to her ideas, so forlorn.' Indeed, even as Caroline takes on an increasingly maternal role in her community towards the poor and needy, the bleak, unproductive nature of her life is insisted upon:

⁴³ Brontë, *Shirley*, pp. 175-77.

‘Winter seemed conquering her spring: the mind’s soil and its treasures were freezing gradually to barren stagnation.’⁴⁴ It is therefore no coincidence that at this moment, Caroline finds herself longing for her mother: ‘the deep, secret, anxious yearning to discover and know her mother strengthened daily’, as the discourse of maternalist philanthropy fails to fill the void of genuine, private emotional connection.⁴⁵

Directly after this yearning for maternal affection of course, Shirley Keeldar enters the novel and for a brief moment, it seems as if Caroline’s friendship with Shirley will be able provide her with the sort of close emotional connection denied to her by Moore, as the two girls plan excursions to Scotland and walks to the appropriately named locations Nunnely dale and Nunnwood. With the entrance of Shirley, Brontë also illustrates further concerns with female philanthropy, as she traces a complex relationship between female charity and wider national affairs. Shirley, unlike Caroline, is an heiress and a landowner in her own right. She thus has far greater independence in determining the shape of her life, and by her land and title would also seem to possess significant influence in her community. As Tim Dolin contends in *Mistress of the House: Women of Property in the Victorian Novel*, Shirley’s social power appears vast, as her ‘sphere is coterminous with the entire district, taking in both the intensely private realm of the retiring spinster and the openly violent public realm of the factory’.⁴⁶ Yet, crucially, Shirley does not regard her influence as a maternal one, as seen with the caring Miss Mann and Miss Ainley. Shirley’s tense relationship

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 177-78.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 180.

⁴⁶ Tim Dolin, *Mistress of the House: Women of Property in the Victorian Novel*, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 1997), p. 19.

with an image of the maternal female landowner is reflected in her masculine name (before Brontë's novel *Shirley* was far more commonly a male name), as well as the male titles and character she assumes whilst dealing with her estate and neighbours, such as Captain Keeldar and Shirley Keeldar, Esquire, Lord of the Manor of Briarfield. Even in her approach to charity, Shirley takes a more masculine tone, as she puts herself in the position of generous benefactor – a role more commonly associated with male philanthropy, as *Coelebs* and *The Life of Hannah More* demonstrate. As Bodenheimer also recognises, Shirley thus seeks to take on the role of 'female paternalist' in her community.⁴⁷ Disturbed by recent local unrest, Shirley desires to put her fortune to greater use and calls a meeting of female philanthropists and clergymen for their practical help and advice:

What I want to do is to *prevent* mischief. I cannot forget, either day or night, that these imbittered [sic] feelings of the poor against the rich have been generated in suffering: they would neither hate nor envy us if they did not deem us so much happier than themselves. To allay this suffering, and thereby lessen this hate, let me, out of my abundance, give abundantly; and that the donation may go farther, let it be made wisely.⁴⁸

Unlike Caroline and Miss Ainley who approach the troubles of the poor through visiting and providing them with clothing, Shirley seeks to influence their situation on a far wider scale. Yet Shirley is no progressive landowner – her aim is for the preservation of the social order, not enacting reform. Despite her concerns that 'there are some families almost starving to death in Briarfield', she assures Caroline that if the poor 'violently wrong me or mine, and then presume

⁴⁷ Bodenheimer, p. 48.

⁴⁸ Brontë, *Shirley*, p. 253.

to dictate to us, I shall quite forget pity for their wretchedness and respect for their poverty, in scorn of their ignorance and wrath at their insolence'.⁴⁹

Crucially, prior to her grand meeting Shirley approaches both Caroline and Miss Ainley on the most appropriate ways to distribute her wealth in the community, which adds to the sense of charity being a particularly feminine action and expertise in the world of *Shirley*. In both these exchanges, Shirley takes on the role of paternal landowner with the two women – announcing her desire for immediate almsgiving to Caroline, only to be urged restraint and taught informed benevolence by her friend, and later providing £300 for Miss Ainley's philanthropy in a scene that evokes William Wilberforce's proclamation to the More sisters, that if they'll be at 'the trouble', he'll 'be at the expense': 'Shirley placed at her disposal £300, and at sight of the money Miss Ainley's eyes filled with joyful tears; for she already saw the hungry fed, the naked clothed, the sick comforted thereby.'⁵⁰

But if Shirley regards herself as a paternal benefactor, it is soon evident that the men of the neighbourhood regard her as a typical Lady Bountiful figure, whose influence must be held in check. As Shirley explains her plans of philanthropy to the rectors Dr Boulton, Mr. Helstone and Mr. Hall, her adoption of a similar masculine role with the clergy renders Mr. Helstone uneasy, as he perceives his own sphere of power under threat from a rival. Despite Shirley's claims to a male identity, Helstone insists on her femininity in his objections to her plan for the surrounding parishes:

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 252; 253.

⁵⁰ Martha More, p. 13; Brontë, *Shirley*, p. 254.

Helstone glanced sharply round with an alert, suspicious expression, as if he apprehended that female craft was at work, and that something in petticoats was somehow trying underhand to acquire too much influence, and make itself of too much importance. Shirley caught and comprehended the expression: -

‘The scheme is nothing,’ said she, carelessly; ‘it is only an outline – a mere suggestion; you, gentlemen, are requested to draw up rules of your own.’

[...] At last he muttered: -

‘Well – you are neither my wife nor my daughter, so I’ll be led for once; but mind – I know I *am* being led: your little female manoeuvres don’t blind me.’

‘Oh!’ said Shirley, dipping the pen in the ink, and putting it into his hand, ‘you must regard me as Captain Keeldar today. This is quite a gentleman’s affair – yours and mine entirely Doctor (so she had dubbed the Rector). The ladies there are only to be our aides-de-camp, and at their peril they speak, til we have settled the whole business.’⁵¹

This image of Shirley as a *thing* ‘in petticoats’ trying to ‘acquire too much influence, and [...] too much importance’ emphasises the instabilities within her model of influence and reiterates the borderline position of even landed women in their communities, as the men of their class can both dehumanise and deny women their claims to parochial power. Even as Shirley insists on her role as Captain Keeldar in the plan, Helstone reads her project as her ‘little female manoeuvres’ and indicates that its success depends upon his and the other rectors’ consent - even as they depend on the local knowledge of female philanthropists: ‘Wherever their memories fell short, Miss Ainley or Miss Hall, if applied to, could help them out; but both ladies took care not to speak unless spoken to [...] each sincerely desired to be useful, and useful the clergy consented to make them: with which boon they were content.’⁵² Although Shirley watches on as her philanthropic scheme comes into fruition with a ‘queer

⁵¹ Brontë, *Shirley*, pp. 257-58.

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 258.

smile' that appears to indicate her success in manipulating the men into agreeing to her project, the subordinate role of her other female philanthropists both calls into question Shirley's ability to maintain her role as the influential paternal landowner, and foregrounds Brontë's own pessimistic assessment of female philanthropy's potential to effect social harmony and transform the parochial sphere.

Indeed, this pessimistic view of class relations comes into focus soon after Shirley's philanthropy is put into action. Despite the avowed success of the charitable fund in alleviating the distress of the unemployed poor and the quietening down of attacks against mills and mill-owners, Robert Moore asserts to Shirley, 'as to the permanent good effect of your charitable fund – I doubt. Eleemosynary relief never yet tranquilised the working classes – it never made them grateful; it is not in human nature that it should.'⁵³ Yet if Brontë is sceptical about the power of Shirley's donations to transform the state of society, there is still one form of organised philanthropy that she depicts more positively – the Church and its Sunday school. In the chapters 'Whitsuntide' and 'The School-Feast' Brontë demonstrates how the Church of England has at least the *potential* to provide a form of social harmony that Shirley as an individual female is ultimately unable to achieve. This contrast between the two forms of charity – individual and institutional – underlines the tense relationship between the female philanthropist and the clergy in the parochial spaces of *Shirley*. In a scene strongly reminiscent of Henry Thompson's account of the feast days of Hannah More's benefit clubs, and no doubt also influenced by Brontë's own experiences

⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 275.

of Patrick Brontë's school's celebrations, the Sunday schools of Briarfield, Whinbury and Nunnely all come together on Whit-Tuesday to parade about the parish before returning to Briarfield school for a feast. Working-class children, their teachers, the schools' patrons and the rectors unite for this day of celebration, as Brontë demonstrates how this religious and philanthropic institution creates a sense of community and class harmony. In another echo of Hannah More, Shirley, Caroline and Miss Ainley have provided many of the poor with smart new clothing for the occasion – an act, which like the work of Lucilla Stanley in *Coelebs* and More for the women of the Mendips, appears to have inspired values of decency and propriety within the working classes:

The lady of the manor – that Shirley – now gazing with pleasure on this well-dressed and happy-looking crowd – has really done them good: her seasonable bounty consoled many a poor family against the coming holiday, and supplied many a child with a new frock or bonnet for the occasion; she knows it, and is elate with the consciousness: glad that her money, example, and influence have really – substantially – benefited those around her. She cannot be charitable like Miss Ainley – it is not in her nature: it relieves her to feel that there is another way of being charitable, practicable for other characters, and under other circumstances.

Caroline, too, is pleased; for she also has done good in her small way; robbed herself of more than one dress, ribbon, or collar she could ill spare to aid in fitting out the scholars of her class; and, as she could not give money, she has followed Miss Ainley's example, in giving her time and her industry to sew for the children.⁵⁴

Although Shirley is distinguished in this scene from Miss Ainley and Caroline by her methods of philanthropy, the image of the three women finding ways to clothe the poor children is a strongly maternal one that counters Shirley's claims of male power and individualism, as the women are depicted as

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 280.

fitting in with the orders from the true paternalists - the clergy: 'What should she bring him? He must not help himself – he must be served by her'.⁵⁵ Despite her problematic relationship with female philanthropy, Brontë can be seen here to indulge in a fantasy of class relations and charity inconsistent with her earlier scepticism, as her heroines seemingly find fulfilment and power from a maternal role within their community. In its vision of social union, this scene complicates Bodenheimer's claim that in *Shirley* Brontë stubbornly refuses 'to accede to any of the romantic fantasies that emerge in the narrative as potential havens of harmony, or stories of resolution', since for a moment, the author appears seduced by the idea of women's maternal power, which she locates within a wider fantasy of Englishness.⁵⁶ The new-found influence of the maternal philanthropist is illustrated by the respect and esteem Caroline's Sunday school pupils have for her, but this influence is presented as dependent on Caroline's status as a Sunday school teacher and on Brontë's fantasies of national identity, which emphasise the natural superiority of the English peasant: 'because she was what they considered wise and good when *on* duty, they kindly overlooked her evident timidity when off [...] Peasant girls as they were, they had too much of her own English sensibility to be guilty of the coarse error'.⁵⁷

These nationalist fantasies come to the fore as the Sunday schools march throughout the countryside singing Rule Britannia. Yet even as the children and the adults, the rich and the poor, all appear in harmony with each other and their countryside, this sense of class and national union is undercut by the Sunday school's encounters with a group of dissenters and then a small band of soldiers,

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 284.

⁵⁶ Bodenheimer, p. 39.

⁵⁷ Brontë, *Shirley*, p. 296.

which occur almost simultaneously: ‘there is a line of red. They are soldiers – cavalry soldiers’; “‘She asks what is it?’” “The Dissenting and Methodist schools, the Baptists, Independents, and Wesleyans, joined in unholy alliance, and turning purposely into this lane with the intention of obstructing our march and driving us back.”⁵⁸ The national and philanthropic institution of the Church is thus just as much under threat as the mills, and the battle for the country lanes of Briarfield between the establishment and the dissenters anticipates the conflict between the soldiers and the workers at Moore’s mill that evening:

Helstone signed to his bands: they clashed out with all the power of brass. He desired them to play ‘Rule, Britannia,’ and ordered the children to join in vocally, which they did with enthusiastic spirit. The enemy was sung and stormed down; his psalm quelled: as far as noise went, he was conquered.⁵⁹

Although the soldiers have by now disappeared into the countryside, their presence, along with the militancy of this scene, draws on how England and its institutions are represented as constantly endangered in *Shirley*, despite any unity achieved by Sunday school feasts or Shirley’s philanthropy. Charity of all forms – and especially the schemes of the gentlewoman – has no lasting influence in the parochial sphere. This sense of the borderline influence of the female philanthropist is underlined by the shift from the celebrations of the day into the night and the riot at Moore’s mill, where both industrialist and clergy are shown to be dependent on another institution – the British army – for their survival. The famous scene where Shirley and Caroline watch from the sidelines as Moore’s mill is attacked and successfully defended, both literalises the marginal status of

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 287; p. 288.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 288.

the female philanthropist in the world of *Shirley* and pushes to the centre stage the image of military repression as a legitimate response to working-class violence and discontent. This emphasis on military power supports Lucasta Miller's assessment of *Shirley* as offering an anti-Chartist comment, as Brontë creates a parallel between the riot scene and the Duke of Wellington's recent suppression of Chartist revolt.⁶⁰

'This is what I wished to prevent,' she said, in a voice whose cadence betrayed the altered impulse of her heart.

'But you could not prevent it; you did your best; it was in vain,' said Caroline, comfortingly. 'Don't grieve, Shirley.'⁶¹

Shirley's despondency as she witnesses the failure of her charity to prevent unrest is reciprocated and developed in a different way by Caroline during the weeks after the riot, as she struggles with her own disappointments with the role of female philanthropist. Unlike Shirley however, who desired her charity to achieve grand social results, Caroline's disillusionment is intensely personal, and sees Brontë's narrative shift back to its individualist critique of maternalist philanthropy. With Shirley preoccupied by a visit from her family, Caroline returns to her former routine of solitude and charity works directed by Miss Ainley. Images of stagnation and sterility increasingly dominate Caroline's philanthropic role, and rather than depicted as the mother to the poor of her community, she is associated instead with the nun, whose cold unproductiveness in Caroline's mind ruptures the text's earlier fantasies of Shirley and Caroline's single womanhood:

⁶⁰ Miller, 'Introduction', p. xxiv.

⁶¹ Brontë, *Shirley*, p. 328.

‘I never find Miss Ainley oppressed with despondency, or lost in grief,’ she thought; ‘yet her cottage is a still, dim little place, and she is without a bright hope or near friend in the world. I remember, though, she told me once, she had tutored her thoughts to tend upwards to Heaven. She allowed there was, and ever had been, little enjoyment in this world for her; and she looks, I suppose, to the bliss of the world to come. So do nuns – with their close cell, their iron lamp, their robe strait as a shroud, their bed narrow as a coffin. She says, often, she has no fear of death [...] I do fear death as yet, but I believe it is because I am young: poor Miss Ainley would cling closer to life, if life had more charms for her. God surely did not create us, and cause us to live, with the sole end of wishing always to die. I believe, in my heart, we were intended to prize life and enjoy it, so long as we retain it. Existence never was originally meant to be that useless, blank, pale, slow-trailing thing it often becomes to many, and is becoming to me, among the rest.’⁶²

Shut out from the loving affections of others, for Caroline the female philanthropist who uses her good works to create a meaningful role for herself is an unloved, *unnatural* creature, whose life is one of living death. Like the nun whose close cell symbolises her isolation from the world and her celibacy the repression of her natural, productive self, life as a female philanthropist is a ‘useless, blank, pale, slow-trailing thing’ for Caroline. The word ‘useless’ is particularly pertinent here for the way it devastates the Evangelical ideal of active usefulness in society, and emphasises motherhood over maternal philanthropy, which is shown to have little value. Rather than providing for the poor, Caroline sees single women like herself and Miss Ainley – and by extension, Hannah More – as on a similar level to them in society, with both groups disregarded by the majority: ‘Old maids, like the houseless and unemployed poor, should not ask for a place and an occupation in the world: the demand disturbs the happy and rich: it disturbs parents.’ Significantly, while Caroline moves from her despondency with a life of charity to an appeal for

⁶² *Ibid*, p. 368-69.

greater occupations for women that has been much taken up by feminist critics, her depression comes as much from her nun-like existence as from her frustration with a life of 'household work and sewing; no earthly pleasure, but an unprofitable visiting'.⁶³ As Miller argues also, 'we must not forget that Caroline wants her lover as much as creative or professional fulfilment'.⁶⁴

Yet paradoxically, even as Brontë uses her narrative voice to substantiate Caroline's pleas for more meaningful work to do – 'You would wish to be proud of your daughters and not to blush for them – then seek for them an interest and an occupation which shall raise them above the flirt, the manoeuvrer, the mischief-making tale-bearer' – the author legitimises her demand through the same language of female philanthropy and duty: 'Keep your girls' minds narrow and fettered – they will still be a plague and a care, sometimes a disgrace to you: cultivate them – give them scope and work – they will be your gayest companions in health; your tenderest nurses in sickness: your most faithful prop in age.'⁶⁵ This strangely circular aspect to Brontë's argument, as we return to her opening image of the single middle-class woman providing comfort and care to others, highlights her uncertain and contradictory depiction of female philanthropy. If *Shirley* appears to reject here Hannah More's argument that the care of the poor is the lady's true profession, Brontë still seems unable to imagine a different world for women like Caroline Helstone, and in the place of the example of Miss Ainley, can only offer instead the life of Miss Mann – familial duty, devotion and selflessness to the point of self-abnegation.

⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 370.

⁶⁴ Miller, 'Introduction', p. xxviii.

⁶⁵ Brontë, *Shirley*, p. 371.

This contradictory depiction of female philanthropy and the role of women in society returns again at the novel's conclusion, which has long offered problems of interpretation for its readers – something which Brontë's closing lines seem to delight in: 'The story is told. I think I now see the judicious reader putting on his spectacles to look for the moral. It would be an insult to his sagacity to offer directions. I only say, God speed him in the quest!'⁶⁶ The final chapter sees Caroline, who has been reunited with her lost mother, receive and accept a marriage proposal from the now penitent and loving Robert Moore. Yet unlike the plot of *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*, this proposal is not an inevitable product of Caroline's charity work, but rather borne out through Caroline's and Moore's separate illnesses, which see them both face death. As Moore paints a picture for Caroline of their future, which includes her mother joining them in their marital home, Brontë returns again to her message that true personal fulfilment can only be achieved through close, emotional relationships – privileging both romantic passion and actual maternal love over the maternalism of female philanthropy. But if philanthropy alone cannot provide the happiness that Caroline finds with her mother and her lover, her role as charity worker endures into Moore's depiction of their shared future, which suggests Brontë's apparent comfort with the idea of *married* women working as philanthropists:

'Caroline, the houseless, the starving, the unemployed, shall come to Hollow's mill from far and near; and Joe Scott shall give them work, and Louis Moore, Esq., shall let them a tenement, and Mrs. Gill shall mete them a portion till the first pay-day.'

She smiled up in his face.

'Such a Sunday-school as you will have, Cary! such collections as you will get! such a day-school as you and Shirley, and Miss Ainley, will

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p. 608.

have to manage between you! The mill shall find salaries for a master and mistress, and the Squire or the Clothier shall give a treat once a-quarter.'

She mutely offered a kiss, an offer taken unfair advantage of, to the extortion of about a hundred kisses.

'Extravagant day-dreams!' said Moore, with a sigh and smile, 'yet perhaps we may realise some of them.'⁶⁷

In Moore's vision, the philanthropy of Caroline and Shirley is now guided by their husbands. Significantly, Shirley, engaged to Moore's brother Louis, is demoted from her role as Lord of the Manor of Briarfield, and is seen to fulfil the same role as the other women of the neighbourhood – women Shirley previously organised and led in her own charitable schemes. This shift in Shirley's position in particular, stresses Brontë's ambivalence about female social power, as both Brontë and Shirley seem to gratefully submit once the true squire and 'master' of Fieldhead takes his place on the estate.⁶⁸ As Brontë wrote to Elizabeth Gaskell in 1851 after reading Harriet Taylor's 'The Enfranchisement of Women',

I think the writer forgets that there is such a thing as self-sacrificing love and disinterested devotion. When I first read the paper – I thought it was the work of a powerful-minded – clear-headed woman who had a hard jealous heart muscles of iron and nerves of bend leather; of a woman who longed for power and had never felt affection. To many women – affection is sweet – and power conquered – indifferent – though we all like influence won.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 606.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 584.

⁶⁹ Brontë, 'To Elizabeth Gaskell, 20th September, 1851', in *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë, Vol. II*, pp. 695-99, (pp. 695-96).

Yet as Moore acknowledges, these images of his future generosity and his wife's charity work are but 'extravagant day-dreams'. As Brontë moves her narrative into the present day and surveys Hollow's mill, the only indication of the fulfilment of Moore's prophecies is in the 'substantial stone and brick and ashes – the cinder-black highway, the cottages, and the cottage-gardens [...] a mighty mill, and a chimney, ambitious as the tower of Babel'.⁷⁰ Caroline's Sunday school, her day school and the paternalist treats of either Louis Moore, Squire of Fieldhead, or Robert Moore, master industrialist, cannot be traced. As noted, critics have long been divided over how to read this ending. Kate Flint interprets the absence of Shirley and Caroline and the destruction of their rural haunts for Moore's chimneys as their engulfment by 'industrialism, their own places of escape and conversation destroyed'.⁷¹ Susan Zlotnick however, reads the scene far more positively, as evidence of Brontë's heralding of 'the world-transforming changes' of industrialisation for the benefit of 'the houseless, the unemployed, the starving, and the ignorant'.⁷²

Rather than insisting on either the wholly positive or negative significance of the conclusion however, I would maintain instead the scene's shifting sense of meaning, as Brontë remains sceptical about notions of social progress but does not reject them outright. After all, the Babel-like chimneys of the present day are set against Brontë's story of her housekeeper's mother terrified by rural superstitions of fairies ('fairish') in the Hollow, some fifty years

⁷⁰ Brontë, *Shirley*, p. 607.

⁷¹ Kate Flint, 'Women Writers, Women's Issues', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, ed. by Heather Glen, (Cambridge: CUP, 2002; repr. 2007), pp. 170-91, (p. 184).

⁷² Zlotnick, p. 99.

previous.⁷³ This ambiguity can be understood if the focus of the interpretation shifts slightly to include Moore's visions of Caroline's philanthropy alongside the physical certainty of his industrial legacy. The uncertainty over Caroline's role in this world of 'substantial stone and brick and ashes' leaves open the question of women's ability to shape the communities they live in and emphasises their borderline position in even the parochial sphere – as seen in Shirley's failure to prevent working-class unrest but also in Caroline's initial resistance to Moore's plan to build over her rural home: 'Horrible! You will change our blue hill-country air into the Stilbro' smoke atmosphere.'⁷⁴ While enough of Moore's 'extravagant day dreams' appear to have been realised to enable our imagining of a position of philanthropic influence for Caroline alongside her husband in their community, Brontë's refusal to give a definitive answer implies a reluctance to endorse this life of charitable works for women – both single and married – even as she struggles to imagine a different role for her heroines. By neither affirming nor denying the role of female philanthropy in *Shirley's* industrial future, Brontë – writing in a moment of new working-class ferment – problematises the discourse made popular by Hannah More that emphasises the reforming power of women over both society and history.

Elizabeth Gaskell

The Life of Charlotte Brontë (1857)

⁷³ Brontë, *Shirley*, p. 607

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 606.

On the 14th May 1850, the novelist Elizabeth Gaskell wrote an impulsive letter ‘on the rebound’ to her friend Lady Kay-Shuttleworth, ‘just as if’, Gaskell commented, ‘I were talking to you’. Gaskell had just learnt of Charlotte Brontë’s visit to the Shuttleworth home of Gawthorpe Hall, and the Manchester novelist was full of excitement about her fellow writer:

No! I never heard of Miss Brontë’s visit; and I should like to hear a great deal more about her, as I have been so much interested in what she has written. I don’t mean merely in the story and mode of narration, wonderful as that is, but in the glimpses one get of *her*, and her modes of thought, and, all unconsciously to herself, of the way in wh. she has suffered. I wonder if she suffers *now*. [...] I should like to know her very much. Does she ever come to Manchester, can you tell? Bradford is not so far away but what she might.⁷⁵

In enquiring about Brontë, Gaskell’s seemingly breathless prose moves quickly from acknowledging Brontë’s wonderful stories and narration to an emphasis on Charlotte Brontë the woman – ‘*her*’ – and crucially, on Brontë as a woman who has suffered, and may suffer still. This shift is reproduced a few sentences later, when Gaskell tells Shuttleworth, ‘I think I told you that I disliked a good deal in the plot of *Shirley*, but the expression of her own thoughts in it is so true and brave, that I greatly admire her’, before swiftly moving on to discussing the tragic plight of single women in society ‘deprived of their natural duties as wives & mothers’. While Gaskell does not explicitly name Charlotte Brontë as one of these suffering single women, her pity for the author along with her critical reference to *Shirley* prior to this discussion reveals Gaskell’s connection of Brontë and her writing to the ‘painful [...] *purposelessness*’ of single women’s lives (Gaskell’s italics).⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Elizabeth Gaskell, ‘To Lady Kay-Shuttleworth, 14th May 1850’, in *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, pp. 115-18, (pp. 115-18).

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 116-17.

In *The Brontë Myth*, Lucasta Miller comments on Gaskell's tendency to regard Brontë 'as a woman of suffering', as opposed to a writer of genius.⁷⁷ Analysing the same letter to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth, Miller notes that Gaskell's 'train of thought' leads from Brontë the writer to 'a long account of the inevitable misery' of single women, to a final contrast with Gaskell's own contentment as wife, mother and novelist.⁷⁸ According to Miller, it is this difference in the family lives of the two women that Gaskell identifies as most responsible for the differences in their literary output, as Gaskell retains 'the sense that Charlotte's singleness, as much as the bereavements she had suffered, defined her as damaged' and suspects 'that the unacceptably unfeminine elements of her novels were morbid symptoms of her unhealthy single state'.⁷⁹

When moving from Gaskell's letters to her biography *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, a more complex series of ideas about single women and women writers begin to emerge however. Linda Peterson's discussion of the biography in *Becoming a Woman of Letters* convincingly presents Gaskell's work as creating a highly influential myth of female authorship for mid-nineteenth-century society – a myth that was rooted in ideas of Brontë's genius.⁸⁰ Peterson's argument complicates Miller's reading of the text somewhat, since Miller defines *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* in her work as a 'philanthropic' biography that is troubled by its subject's notions of creativity.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Miller, *The Brontë Myth*, p. 32.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p. 33.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p. 34.

⁸⁰ Linda Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

⁸¹ Miller, *Brontë Myth*, p. 57.

My discussion of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* seeks to contribute to these varying interpretations of the Brontë-Gaskell relationship, as well as to Gaskell's image of Brontë as an artist. However, I also emphasise the significance of the domestic scenes of Gaskell's biography – not just the literary. Crucially, both Miller and Peterson – despite the differences in their arguments – read the domestic scenes in the text as straightforward devices that work to construct an extremely feminine image of Brontë, but tensions endure throughout. Remembering the views about single women that Gaskell expressed to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth, it is arguable that when writing the biography after Brontë's death in 1855, Gaskell sought to defend her friend's reputation by restoring Brontë to a feminine community that in fact, for much of her life Gaskell was never really sure that Brontë belonged to in the first place.

Linda Peterson's study of *Charlotte Brontë* defines the text's structure as operating along a “parallel currents” model, which ‘separated the identity of the author from that of the woman.’ According to Peterson, this strategy of Gaskell's preserved ‘the category of artistic genius for women's authorship, even while demonstrating that literary women could fulfil (and would not abandon) the duties of domestic life.’ While Peterson's analysis of the artistic ‘current’ explores the tensions within Gaskell's image of female authorship, when discussing the private ‘current’, Peterson notes only that, ‘Throughout the *Life* Gaskell stresses Brontë's exemplary domesticity.’⁸² In Peterson's work, Gaskell's account of Brontë's domestic life is free from the sort of questions and excisions that Peterson regards as persistently disrupting the woman artist narrative:

⁸² Linda Peterson, p. 132; p. 7; p. 135.

Gaskell minimises the professional aspects of Brontë's career, excludes financial details from Brontë's letters to her publisher, and shows her subject as much more interested in ideas than in profits. [...] *The Life* creates a mid-Victorian model of the woman artist as one more concerned with artistic expression than with professionalism, a woman who both fulfils her 'quiet regular duties' and expresses her 'splendid talents,' thus answering critics who did not think this combination possible.⁸³

Peterson's unquestioning reading of the local and domestic sections of Gaskell's biography corresponds with Lucasta Miller's argument in *The Brontë Myth*, which describes *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* as transforming its subject into a 'nun-like figure providing succour to the poor of the parish and a dutiful daughter', as well as an 'icon of exemplary womanhood'.⁸⁴ Yet both Peterson's and Miller's interpretations of the domestic and parochial scenes in Gaskell's work ignore their complexities and anxieties, as Gaskell struggles to transform the woman writer into the female philanthropist. Indeed, Gaskell frequently underlines Brontë's inability to carry out maternalist duties in her community. These complexities and anxieties both reflect back to Gaskell's response to *Shirley* and anticipate the themes of her novella *My Lady Ludlow*, as the author remains uncertain about the relationship between women – especially unmarried gentlewomen – and society. Hence although *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* has been much discussed in terms of Gaskell's understanding of female authorship – 'speaking for herself as much as for Brontë' – my analysis illustrates the work's competing issues with the struggles of single women and their difficulties in influencing the parochial sphere.⁸⁵ In this respect, the Charlotte Brontë of

⁸³ *Ibid*, pp. 148-9.

⁸⁴ Miller, *Brontë Myth*, p. 34; p. 81.

⁸⁵ Linda Peterson, p. 134.

Gaskell's narrative echoes Brontë's depiction of Caroline Helstone and her isolated, fragile existence.

Like the world of *Shirley*, the Haworth of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* is a violent, masculine community, beset by 'enduring grudges' and extremes of male behaviour – 'there is little display of any of the amenities of life among this wild, rough population. Their accost is curt; their accent and tone of speech blunt and harsh.'⁸⁶ Even before Gaskell details the distant relationship Brontë maintained with her neighbours, it is clear that this parochial space is not particularly amenable to the influence of the gentlewoman and Gaskell takes care to underline this in her third chapter: 'I believe many of the Yorkshiremen would object to the system of parochial visiting; their surly independence would revolt from the idea of any one having a right, from his office, to inquire into their condition, to counsel, or to admonish them.'⁸⁷ Crucially, the Brontë sisters are seen to prefer walks on the moor to walks into the village, as Gaskell emphasises their disconnection from their community. This disconnection however, is shown to have its origins in childhood, and more specifically, from the death of their mother, as if the lack of a maternal bond from the Brontës' infancy ensured Charlotte Brontë's own inability to form a relationship with her community years later:

From their first going to Haworth, their walks were directed rather out towards the heathery moors, sloping upwards behind the parsonage, than towards the long descending street. A good old woman, who came to nurse Mrs. Brontë in the illness – an internal cancer – which grew and gathered upon her, not many months after her arrival at Haworth, tells me that at that time the six little creatures used to walk out, hand in hand,

⁸⁶ Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, p. 15.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p. 42.

towards the glorious wild moors, which in after days they loved so passionately.⁸⁸

Thus while Miller sees Brontë's status as a single woman until 1854 as the central concern of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Brontë's identity as a motherless girl is in fact of equal importance to Gaskell's pitying – and inconsistent – depiction of her friend. Indeed, the death of Brontë's mother is something that Gaskell emphasises in her letters and her biography, stating in a letter to Catherine Winkworth in August 1850, 'An old woman at Burnley who nursed [Mrs. Brontë] at last, says she used to lie crying in bed, and saying "Oh God my poor children – oh God my poor children!" continually.'⁸⁹ Despite the fact that she too, lost her mother early in her childhood, for Gaskell, Brontë's motherless state is another factor behind her problematic relationship with society. As Gaskell's own writing demonstrates, she regarded female power as rooted in woman's maternal identity, and Brontë, without mother *or* children, disrupts Gaskell's vision of women's influence as philanthropists in their communities, and also as writers in wider society.

Gaskell's liberal politics emerge in her biography, as she re-nuances the history behind the plot of *Shirley* to allow greater expression of sympathy for the workers and the Luddite cause. Yet Gaskell appears unable to offer a similar revision of Brontë herself, as she does not transform the conservative Charlotte Brontë into caring philanthropist. Indeed, *Charlotte Brontë* reveals Gaskell's

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p. 43.

⁸⁹ Elizabeth Gaskell, 'To Catherine Winkworth, 25th August 1850', *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, pp. 123-26, (p.124).

sense of a want of compassion in Brontë towards her community and an insurmountable distance between Brontë and the parochial sphere:

We forget, now-a-days, so rapid have been the changes for the better, how cruel was the condition of numbers of labourers at the close of the great Peninsular war. The half-ludicrous nature of some of their grievances has lingered on in tradition; the real intensity of their sufferings has become forgotten. They were maddened and desperate.⁹⁰

While Gaskell reiterates over and over Brontë's maternal care towards her sisters, calling Brontë a 'motherly friend and guardian' towards Anne and Emily Brontë after the death of their mother and their two eldest siblings, this maternal image of Brontë is held in tension with references to her repeated failures to extend this care out into her community. As daughter of Haworth's rector, we see Brontë fulfilling her charitable obligations but Gaskell takes care to present them as just that, rather than arising from personal concern or feeling: 'Mr. Brontë was faithful in visiting the sick, [...] and so was his daughter Charlotte too; but, cherishing and valuing privacy themselves, they were perhaps over-delicate in not intruding upon the privacy of others.'⁹¹ Significantly, Brontë's aversion to a closer relationship with her poorer neighbours is depicted as learnt from her father. This issue of privacy returns, as Gaskell continues to emphasise the isolation of the Brontë sisters from their community:

They seldom went downwards through the village. They were shy of meeting even familiar faces, and were scrupulous about entering the house of the very poorest uninvited. They were steady teachers at the Sunday-school, a habit which Charlotte kept up very faithfully, even after she was left alone; but they never faced their kind voluntarily, and always preferred the solitude and freedom of the moors.⁹²

⁹⁰ Gaskell, *Charlotte Brontë*, p. 86.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, p. 64; p. 42.

⁹² *Ibid*, p. 96.

Again, as Gaskell describes a particularly ‘sickly’ winter at Haworth, Brontë’s nursing of her neighbours is undercut by this sense of duty to her actions, since although whenever ‘there was a real need for the presence of the clergyman’s daughters’, Brontë was ‘never found wanting’, she remains ‘shy of bestowing more social visits on the parishioners’.⁹³ This constant tension between describing Brontë’s charitable work and then critiquing the emotional motivation behind it implies that there was indeed, something wanting in Brontë’s connection to her community, and undermines Gaskell’s attempts to imagine the unmarried gentlewoman as maternal philanthropist.

It is only when Charlotte Brontë marries and becomes Mrs. Nicholls that Gaskell is able to represent her subject as embedded within her community and as a compassionate and caring parochial figure. Gaskell quotes from Brontë’s letters about her husband to illustrate this, as if to demonstrate how maternal philanthropy naturally flows out from the role of wife:

I am obliged to be more practical, for my dear Arthur is a very practical, as well as a very punctual and methodical man. [...] Almost every afternoon he pays visits among the poor parishioners. Of course, he often finds a little work for his wife to do, and I hope she is not sorry to help him.⁹⁴

Whereas before, Gaskell connected her vision of Brontë with the purposelessness of single women’s lives, now she uses Brontë’s words to underline the active usefulness of her life as a curate’s wife, and the new communal aspect of Brontë’s existence. Brontë’s walks in the countryside are balanced by her walks with her husband into Haworth, as on Christmas Day 1854 when she and

⁹³ *Ibid*, p. 277.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 452.

Nicholls walked to a ‘poor old woman’, ‘carrying with them a great spice-cake to make glad her heart.’ According to Gaskell, on this Christmas ‘many a humble meal in Haworth was made more plentiful by [Brontë’s] gifts’.⁹⁵ It is at Brontë’s funeral however, that Gaskell most effectively depicts her friend as a female philanthropist *par excellence*. Gaskell’s description of Brontë’s mourners thronging ‘the churchyard and church’ echoes the scenes of sadness in Henry Thompson’s account of Hannah More’s death – especially in Gaskell’s stress upon the grief found in the poor households at Brontë’s passing. The tragedy of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* is that Brontë died so soon after her marriage and whilst pregnant: “‘Oh!’ she whispered forth, ‘I am not going to die, am I? He will not separate us, we have been so happy.’” Yet whilst Brontë never experienced biological motherhood, at her funeral Gaskell reveals how, once married, Brontë took on the role of mother to her parish and exhibited the sort of compassion that Gaskell had found so lacking in her previously:

Among those humble friends who passionately grieved over the dead, was a village girl that had been betrayed some little time before, but who had found a holy sister in Charlotte. She had sheltered her with her help, her counsel, her strengthening words; had ministered to her needs in her time of trial. Bitter, bitter was the grief of this poor young woman, when she heard that her friend was sick unto death, and deep is her mourning until this day. A blind girl, living some four miles from Haworth, loved Mrs. Nicholls so dearly that, with many cries and entreaties, she implored those about her to lead her along the roads, and over the moor-paths, that she might hear the last solemn words.⁹⁶

It is these images of Brontë’s philanthropy that Lucasta Miller cites in support of her argument that *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* strives to ‘create a

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 453-54.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 455-56.

sense of female community' via its 'anecdotal stories of abused or suffering women', which 'sacralise' Charlotte 'into a nun-like "holy sister"' and create 'such a feeling of female philanthropy that Charlotte could enter readers' imaginations as a symbolic figure offering emotional support'.⁹⁷ Yet it is crucial that these depictions of Brontë's charity only occur once she has been transformed into Mrs. Nicholls – something that Miller does not acknowledge. If, as Gaskell noted to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth, she 'disliked a good deal in the plot of Shirley', her criticisms must be countered by the fact that when Gaskell came to write her own story about a young unmarried gentlewoman living in a Yorkshire parsonage, she equally struggled to make the model of maternal influence fit with the experiences of a motherless, single, seemingly isolated woman.⁹⁸ Although Gaskell offered a much more empowered depiction of female influence with her 1855 novel *North and South*, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, with its sources in life and not fiction, draws out some of Gaskell's deeper concerns about the position of single women in society. Her uncertainty about their very ability to perform a maternal role in their community illustrates the borderline position of many single women in the parochial sphere, as well as the fundamental instabilities inherent to the maternal model of female influence. These lingering concerns of Gaskell surface again in her novella *My Lady Ludlow*, which was written in the two years after her biography of Charlotte Brontë. As we shall see, while *My Lady Ludlow* presents a confident depiction of the role played by women in their communities, there are moments of

⁹⁷ Miller, *The Brontë Myth*, p. 91.

⁹⁸ Elizabeth Gaskell, 'To Lady Kay-Shuttleworth, 14th May 1850', in *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, pp. 116.

recognition that even as it is written, Gaskell's narrative of female power and influence is under threat.

Elizabeth Gaskell

My Lady Ludlow (1859)

My Lady Ludlow is, as Gaskell's biographer Jenny Uglow describes, 'the least regarded of Gaskell's longer' short stories and yet, despite its seeming 'shapelessness' is 'far cleverer and more experimental than first appears'. For Uglow, the text's cleverness lies in its narrative structure, which sees the story of Lady Ludlow narrated by her ward Margaret Dawson, who then in turn, (in the *Round the Sofa* version which this chapter refers to) tells the story to an anonymous and contemporary female listener, who records the tale for Gaskell's readers of 1859. Lady Ludlow herself also tells Margaret stories of the French Revolution and her youth in eighteenth-century society, and Margaret's narrative is further punctuated by letters between women and anecdotes of other female figures of Lady Ludlow's acquaintance. For Uglow this structure renders *My Lady Ludlow* an especially 'feminine fiction' being both 'flexible and detailed' as, 'Doors open further and further into the past as each person's tale unreels.'⁹⁹ Significantly, it is this movement into the past, even as the story of Lady Ludlow is re-told from generation to generation that emphasises the borderline position of Gaskell's female philanthropist in her text, as the tension in temporality

⁹⁹ Uglow, p. 468.

reveals an uncertainty about the lasting authority of such women in Victorian society.

On the one hand, *My Lady Ludlow* is a perfect illustration of the power women could derive from their class status in the parochial sphere. As Lady Ludlow of Hanbury Court – an estate which is ‘her ancestral home’ and ‘hers by right’ – the widowed Lady Ludlow acts as philanthropist to her poorer neighbours and rules her parish as a ‘little queen’.¹⁰⁰ *My Lady Ludlow* can thus be read as another response to Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley*, as with the character of Lady Ludlow, Gaskell reworks the aristocratic Shirley Keeldar, transforming Shirley’s failed philanthropic schemes into success. Unlike Shirley, Lady Ludlow is an intensely maternal figure – having had nine children – and has no desire to play the role of paternalist landowner, although she initially subscribes to patriarchal traditions. Gaskell’s narrative therefore sees Lady Ludlow learn the importance of her maternity to her wider community. As Jenny Uglow acknowledges also, it is Lady Ludlow’s transition from following the customs of her dead husband and the men of the Hanbury family to ‘a more democratic, outward-looking “maternal” ethos’ in her dealings with her neighbours that sees her bolster her position in the community sphere.¹⁰¹

Yet at the same time, the insecurity that pervaded Gaskell’s vision of maternal influence in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* returns to haunt *My Lady Ludlow*, albeit in a different form. Whereas in her biography of Brontë, Gaskell revealed her uncertainty about single women as maternal philanthropists, in *My Lady Ludlow* Gaskell demonstrates an awareness that the model of philanthropic

¹⁰⁰ Gaskell, *My Lady Ludlow*, p. 17; p. 149.

¹⁰¹ Uglow, p. 467.

influence for women in their communities is an inherently unstable one – open to challenges from wider social change, but also from other rival (male) figures, as once again, a clergyman comes to contest a female philanthropist's sphere of influence. Thus even as the Lady Bountiful Lady Ludlow seems secure in her position, she is another borderline female figure in the parochial sphere. Indeed, her connections to her local community make her particularly vulnerable, as Gleadle's analysis of women and citizenship in the nineteenth century indicates, since although women of status 'could accrue considerable authority' in the community, it was also 'these parochial realms' that were 'the most threatened by broader processes of social, political, and cultural change'.¹⁰²

This threat of social and political change to the maternal power of Lady Ludlow is illustrated by the setting of Gaskell's novella in the days of the early nineteenth century and by Gaskell's emphasis on Lady Ludlow's elderliness and old-fashioned character. Gaskell's heroine is considered out-dated even by her contemporaries and must have seemed doubly so to the readers of 1859: 'you will never meet with a Lady Ludlow in these days.'¹⁰³ Indeed, even Lady Ludlow's power as a mother appears doubtful throughout much of the narrative, as the deaths of all of her nine children are documented. Even as Gaskell charts Lady Ludlow's growing tolerance of change such as the arrival of dissenters into the village, working-class education and the increasing significance of trade and urban areas, this connection of Lady Ludlow to the transformations of the Victorian era is made fraught by an understanding that such changes undermine the power of the aristocratic woman in her community, and ultimately, will

¹⁰² Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens*, p. 18.

¹⁰³ Gaskell, *My Lady Ludlow*, p. 9.

render her obsolete. *My Lady Ludlow* thus works to connect the socially conservative politics of women like Hannah More to the reforms of the Victorian era (Lady Ludlow is very much like More in her anxieties about the French Revolution, and the education of the poor being left in the wrong hands). On one level, this connection of two moments in time by Gaskell enables the celebration of women's relationship with social progress under the cover of conventionality and nostalgia. But on the other, it gestures to the problems within philanthropic influence, as the power of women like Hannah More and Lady Ludlow is seemingly slowly eroded.

The arrival of the clergyman Mr. Gray into the community demonstrates the complexities of Lady Ludlow's authority in the parochial sphere. Gray's predecessor Mr. Mountford is presented as a typical clergyman of the late-eighteenth century: neglectful of his parishioners and inclined to think of his own comforts first. Yet it is clear that Mountford's neglect of his duties has enabled Lady Ludlow to transform the parish into what Gleadle has termed a zone of opportunity for female philanthropy, as Lady Ludlow has used her aristocratic status to step into the breach left by Mountford and exert a significant influence over her neighbours' lives.¹⁰⁴ Gray is different from Mountford however, and his differences exemplify the vulnerability of Lady Ludlow's philanthropic influence. Crucially, unlike the High Church Tory Mr. Mountford – 'true blue [...] to the backbone' – Gray is an Evangelical, which at first, Lady Ludlow refuses to believe: 'She could not believe anything so bad, without a great deal of evidence.'¹⁰⁵ While Gray's readings of Christianity are personally offensive to

¹⁰⁴ Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens*, p. 146.

¹⁰⁵ Gaskell, *My Lady Ludlow*, p. 22; p. 23.

Lady Ludlow (such as his terming of Sunday as the ‘Sabbath’), it is his alliance with such reforms as working-class education and anti-slavery that is particularly problematic to the aristocrat for the way it undermines her own authoritative position. Put simply, Gray’s beliefs see him symbolise the Victorian future – a future that threatens the hierarchy of Lady Ludlow’s community, as her friend Miss Galindo recognises:

‘There he goes,’ she said, ‘clucking up the children just like an old hen, and trying to teach them about their salvation and their souls, and I don’t know what – things that it is just blasphemy to speak about out of church. And he potters old people about reading their Bibles. [...] And what’s the next thing our young parson does? Why, he tries to make us all feel pitiful for the black slaves, and leaves little pictures of negroes about, with the question printed below, “Am I not a man and a brother?” just as if I was to be hail-fellow-well-met with every negro footman. They do say he takes no sugar in his tea, because he thinks he sees spots of blood in it. Now I call that superstition.’¹⁰⁶

Gray’s Evangelicalism sees him adhere to the ideology of active usefulness typified by the conduct of Hannah More and Lucilla Stanley. Although Lady Ludlow is initially pleased to have a clergyman so interested in his parishioners and her villagers, and cries Gray ‘up as a godsend to the parish’, Gray’s zeal also leads him to claim the parish as his own site of special influence in a direct contest with Lady Ludlow.¹⁰⁷ Gray’s strong sense of responsibility ‘for all the evil he did not strive to overcome’ challenges Lady Ludlow’s own responsibilities as a member of the landed elite and sees him insist on a far greater insight into the lives of his parishioners than she, as Lady Bountiful, could ever have: ‘your ladyship only knows the surface of things, and barely that,

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

that pass in your village'.¹⁰⁸ Thus whilst Gray and Lady Ludlow's shared concern for the poor could see them work together in the parochial sphere, they frequently clash over questions of authority – even as Gaskell presents both of their positions sympathetically. As the two argue about Gray's plans for a Sunday school, Gray notes how Lady Ludlow exploits 'some old feudal right' to prevent him from building a school house at his own expense on Hanbury 'leasehold property'. Likewise, Lady Ludlow complains to Margaret Dawson (the story's narrator) about the disrespectful nature of Gray's persistent arguments in favour of working-class education: 'And why should he be convinced? [...] He has only to acquiesce. Though he is appointed by Mr. Croxton, I am the lady of the manor, as he must know.'¹⁰⁹

Hence although Lady Ludlow's conservative views of social class, along with her belief in charitable visiting place her in a relationship with another female philanthropist of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – Hannah More – it is actually the clergyman Mr. Gray who interacts with the narrative of reform embedded within Hannah More's philanthropy. This splitting of More's simultaneously conservative and reforming characteristics both draws out the complexities of Hannah More's legacy to Victorian female philanthropy, and enables Gaskell to demonstrate the openness of her philanthropic female characters to potentially threatening social change, as *My Lady Ludlow* documents how the Lady Bountiful comes to accommodate Gray's reforming zeal within her own conservative perspective – a doubleness and flexibility that is central to Gaskell's vision of maternal power. Significant to this reading of

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 31; p. 136.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 137; p. 117.

Gray as reflecting the reforming side of *female* philanthropy, as opposed to paternal charity, is Gray's extremely feminine depiction throughout *My Lady Ludlow*. The femininity of Gray has also been commented upon by Beth Fowkes Tobin, who notes Gray's 'physical frailty, nervousness, sensibility, and the desire to nurture and comfort the sick and the poor'.¹¹⁰ Indeed, Gray's 'femininity' corresponds with his evangelical beliefs, as demonstrated by Davidoff and Hall's in their analysis of the movement: 'Evangelical manhood, with its stress on self-sacrifice and influence, came dangerously close to embracing "feminine" qualities.'¹¹¹ Thus as Lady Ludlow increasingly accepts Gray's methods of charity in the community, she increasingly promotes a maternal vision of self and society. Yet at the same time, in endorsing the clergyman, Lady Ludlow accepts a rival to her authoritative position in the parochial sphere.

This sense of rivalry between Lady Ludlow and Gray is illustrated in their dispute over a case of theft, which brings to light the numerous power contests that inform the parochial community and its politics. The pauper Job Gregson, who has previously been 'strongly suspected of poaching' and squats on Hareman's Common, has now been accused of stealing, and despite his innocence of this crime the Justices of the Peace seem intent to send Job to gaol. Job has been accused by the newly appointed Justice Lathom, and it is out of 'compliment to Mr. Lathom' since 'it is his first committal' that his fellow Justices of the Peace refuse to 'tell him there is no evidence' against the man and are happy to send him to prison. Crucially, all 'the Squires hang so together' that Gray cannot persuade them to see justice done, thus forcing the clergyman to

¹¹⁰ Tobin, p. 103.

¹¹¹ Davidoff and Hall, p. 111.

appeal to Lady Ludlow, as her rank offers her greater influence over her fellow aristocrats – especially since ‘the Lathoms of Hathaway Court were cousins to the Hanburys.’¹¹² Lady Ludlow’s refusal to help Gray reveals the strong connections between power and space in the community sphere, as Job Gregson’s poaching and thus his disrespect of property and boundaries is held against Lady Ludlow’s deeply-held reverence of historical, patriarchal institutions, as well as her own class loyalty. With this reverence, Lady Ludlow is content to leave the fate of Job Gregson to the Justices of the Peace, whose authority in the matter she represents to Gray in explicitly spatial terms:

‘I suppose this additional evidence is before the justices: men of good family, and of honour and credit, well known in the county. They naturally feel that the opinion of one of themselves must have more weight than the words of a man like Job Gregson, who bears a very indifferent character – has been strongly suspected of poaching, coming from no one knows where, squatting on Hareman’s Common – which by the way, is extra-parochial, I believe; consequently you, as a clergyman, are not responsible for what goes on there: and, although impolitic, there might be some truth in what the magistrates said, in advising you to mind your own business,’ said her ladyship, smiling, ‘and they might be tempted to bid me mind mine, if I interfered, Mr. Gray; might they not?’¹¹³

The issue of poaching, as will be seen later with Mrs. Humphry Ward’s novel *Marcella*, is central to local politics for the way in which it symbolises a working-class challenge to the property and power of the upper classes. Lady Ludlow’s horror of poachers suggests her sense of her class’ vulnerability – an idea emphasised later by her terrifying tales of the French Revolution, which dominate the middle of Gaskell’s narrative. According to her perception of local

¹¹² Gaskell, *My Lady Ludlow*, pp. 28-29.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, p. 29.

space, if either she or Gray challenge the rule of the Justices, then they both run the risk of encroaching on patriarchal methods of law and order in an issue that must be considered ‘extra-parochial’ and thus beyond the influence of clergyman and female philanthropist.

Gray however, refuses to accept such limitations upon his duties as a clergyman, and as he leaves Hanbury Court he asserts, ‘God help him! He was responsible for all the evil he did not strive to overcome.’ This vision of moral responsibility expands the influence of the clergy beyond the strict boundaries of the parish, as well as fosters relationships *between* the classes. Gray’s evangelical transformation of the community sphere into a space of active duty and mutual responsibility is seen to have a sudden and deep impact upon Lady Ludlow: ‘My lady turned sharp round away from us, and Mary Mason said afterwards she thought her ladyship was much vexed with both of us for having been present, and with me for having repeated what Mr. Gray had said.’¹¹⁴ It prompts the aristocrat to visit the hovel on Hareman’s Common where the Gregson family live. This act of philanthropic visiting overturns Lady Ludlow’s conviction in the justice system, and inspires her to confront Mr. Lathom with her new knowledge about the case and the condition of the poor. In their subsequent exchange, Lady Ludlow repeats the evidence she has gathered from her philanthropic visit – setting private, domestic knowledge against the full force of the law. When Lathom uses legal subterfuges to insist on Gregson’s guilt and his own lack of responsibility in the matter – ‘I am not answerable for the other magistrates’ decision’ – Lady Ludlow questions Lathom’s understanding of responsibility in language similar to that used by Gray earlier:

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 31.

And do you mean to say, Mr. Lathom, that you don't consider yourself responsible for all injustice or wrong-doing that you might have prevented, and have not? Nay, in this case the first germ of injustice was your own mistake. I wish you had been with me a little while ago, and seen the misery in that poor fellow's cottage.¹¹⁵

Unlike Gray however, Lady Ludlow is able to reinforce her arguments with the power and prestige of her rank, as she offers bail for Gregson – using her financial authority to make literal Gray's vision of mutual responsibility. This act, Lady Ludlow maintains, is not so much for Gregson but for his wife and children, thereby underlining her increasingly maternal vision of society, as well as her emerging dissatisfaction with the patriarchal practices of her class. Significantly, the aristocratic philanthropist represents her power to challenge Lathom as both local *and* national. Lady Ludlow's invocation of parliament stresses the strongly political aspect of aristocratic female identity in the early nineteenth-century, as well as illustrates how Gaskell uses female philanthropy in the parochial sphere to envisage an empowered and active form of womanhood:

'I am sure you will not refuse, sir, to accept bail. I offer to bail the fellow out, and to be responsible for his appearance at the sessions. What do you say to that, Mr. Lathom?'

'The offence of theft is notailable, my lady.'

'Not in ordinary cases, I dare say. But I imagine this is an extraordinary case. The man is sent to prison out of compliment to you, and against all evidence, as far as I can learn. He will have to rot in gaol for two months, and his wife and children to starve. I, Lady Ludlow, offer to bail him out, and pledge myself for his appearance at next quarter-sessions.'

'It is against the law, my lady.'

'Bah! Bah! Bah! Who makes laws? Such as I, in the House of Lords – such as you, in the House of Commons. We, who make the laws in St.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 34.

Stephen's may break the mere forms of them, when we have right on our sides, on our land, and amongst our own people.'¹¹⁶

Even as Lady Ludlow claims the power of parliament, her argument is of course undermined by the fact that as a woman, she has no authority to make the laws in the House of Lords. This inconsistency gestures to the instabilities within female citizenship during the nineteenth century, as well as to the limits of the power afforded by female philanthropy. What seems to win the day for Lady Ludlow is her ranking of political power, as in her references to the House of Commons and the House of Lords, she effectively reminds Lathom of his inferior position in the local community, since in the days pre-1832 the House of Lords continued to exert political authority over the lower chamber. While Lady Ludlow speaks of 'our land' and 'our people' she is in fact, claiming the parochial sphere as her own, and back from the rule of the squirearchy. As with Hannah More, but also with the authoritarian Shirley Keeldar, far from advocating a more egalitarian social structure, Lady Ludlow positions herself as the most fitting ruler of the neighbourhood: 'A pretty set you and your brother magistrates are to administer justice throughout the land! I always said a good despotism was the best form of government; and I am twice as much in favour of it now I see what a quorum is!'¹¹⁷

Unbeknownst to Lady Ludlow, Mr. Gray is present throughout her entire discussion with Mr. Lathom. When the philanthropist realises this, she is initially mortified at having carried out so spectacular a u-turn in front of her rival, and

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 35.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 35.

for Margaret Dawson, Lady Ludlow's face is 'as good as a play'.¹¹⁸

Nevertheless, Lady Ludlow extricates herself from any potential awkwardness by exploiting the idea of feminine changeability and her maternal connection with the Gregson family home. These verbal manoeuvres by the female philanthropist thus emphasise the particular and natural ability of women to change in Gaskell's writings, and the special connection between femininity and progress, even as such progress seemingly threatens the female authority of Lady Ludlow:

'I thank you, Mr. Gray. I was not aware that you were here, but I think I can understand on what errand you came. And seeing you here recalls me to a duty I owe Mr. Lathom. Mr. Lathom, I have spoken to you pretty plainly – forgetting until I saw Mr. Gray that only this very afternoon I differed from him on this very question; taking completely, at that time, the same view of the whole subject which you have done; thinking that the county would be well rid of such a man as Job Gregson, whether he had committed this theft or not. Mr. Gray and I did not part quite friends,' she continued, bowing towards him; 'but it so happened that I saw Job Gregson's wife and home – I felt that Mr. Gray had been right and I had been wrong; so, *with the famous inconsistency of my sex*, I came hither to scold you,' smiling towards Mr. Lathom, who looked half-sulky yet, and did not relax a bit of his gravity at her smile, 'for holding the same opinion that I had done an hour before.'¹¹⁹ [Emphasis added].

If Lady Ludlow's claiming of political power to Lathom hints at the instabilities within Gaskell's model of philanthropic female authority, these instabilities are further revealed in Lady Ludlow's clashes with Gray over his desire to build a Sunday school in the parish. Gray's appeals are seconded by Lady Ludlow's steward Mr. Horner – a man of 'trade and commerce' – and thus the aristocrat finds herself defending her anti-education position from both

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

evangelical and materialist arguments: ‘Mr. Horner wanted to make every man useful and active in this world [...] and therefore he fell into the new cry for education. Mr. Gray did not care much – Mr. Horner thought not enough – for this world, [...] but he would have every one prepared for the world to come [...] and therefore Mr. Gray wanted education.’¹²⁰ As these two men in their connections to vital religion and industry crudely symbolise the Victorian future, Lady Ludlow’s opposition to their proposed educating of the working classes emphasises her conservative perspective. The Lady Bountiful recognises the radicalism of their proposals and repeatedly refers to the French Revolution whenever the dreaded Sunday school is brought up:

‘It was a right word,’ she continued, ‘that I used, when I called reading and writing “edge-tools”. If our lower orders have these edge-tools given them, we shall have the terrible scenes of the French Revolution acted over again in England. When I was a little girl, one never heard of the rights of men, one only heard of the duties. Now, here was Mr. Gray, only last night, talking of the right every child has to instruction. I could hardly keep patience with him, and at length we fairly came to words; and I told him I would have no such thing as a Sunday-school (or a Sabbath-school, as he call it, just like a Jew) in my village.’¹²¹

By having her female philanthropist oppose the Sunday school movement, Gaskell reveals the complexities of the conservative reform narrative embedded within More’s vision of female philanthropy and authority. As the contest between Lady Ludlow and Gray intensifies, with Lady Ludlow exploiting her ‘old feudal right’ to prevent Gray building a school in the parish without her permission, Gaskell offers a reworking of the Blagdon Controversy, except now it is the influential local woman who obstructs the clergy’s desire to instruct the

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 48

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

rural poor.¹²² Although as mentioned, Gray is an extremely feminised figure in *My Lady Ludlow*, the fact that it is the *female* philanthropist who resists the Sunday school emphasises that it is the gentlewomen of the community who have most to lose if Gray's plan is put in place. Hannah More, famously, sought to preserve her class authority by only teaching reading and not writing in her schools - 'They learn of weekdays such coarse works as may fit them for servants. I allow of no writing' – but as her letters from her old age demonstrate, such conservative practices (to her horror) were increasingly outdated by the 1820s: 'It is in my poor judgment preposterous to think of making labouring men profound Historians, Philosophers &c – if they could find the money, where would they find the time?'¹²³ While Gray sees his school as teaching children to look 'higher than any earthly dignities', Lady Ludlow understands that his parishioners will be encouraged to disregard her influence, as the clergyman seeks to teach the villagers to look beyond social hierarchy: 'They are trained to respect you in words and deed; you are the highest they ever look up to; they have no notion of higher.'¹²⁴

That this unthinking obedience of the female philanthropist will be the eroded by the Sunday school is underlined by Miss Galindo's experiences with her servant Sally after Gray has encouraged her to read her Bible. Sally, who is a dwarf and has been employed by Miss Galindo as much out of charity as necessity, roasts their meat for dinner all 'to a cinder' because of her Bible

¹²² *Ibid*, p. 137.

¹²³ Quoted by Martha More in *Mendip Annals*, p. 6. Hannah More, 'To William Wilberforce, 1820', quoted by Anne Stott in *Hannah More: The First Victorian*, p. 257. More was responding to John Foster's *An Essay on the Evils of Popular Ignorance*, (London: Holdsworth and Ball, 1820).

¹²⁴ Gaskell, *My Lady Ludlow*, p. 135.

reading and praying, and when confronted by Miss Galindo, ‘sauc[e]’ her ‘and said something about Martha and Mary, implying [...] that she had chosen the better part.’ In citing the story of Martha and Mary to her employer, Sally rejects her duties as domestic servant and the power of her mistress in favour of religious authority. Even though Miss Galindo successfully teaches her servant a lesson about household management, she recognises that now Sally is under the influence of Gray and the Bible, her power is not what it once was: ‘I heard her at it again about Mary and Martha, and I have no doubt that Mr. Gray will teach her to consider me a lost sheep.’¹²⁵ The social changes brought about by working-class education are then emphasised by the career of Harry Gregson, whose father’s brush with the law caused such strife in the community. Harry is educated secretly by Horner and is later taken up by Gray and ultimately, rises from the position of rural labourer on Lady Ludlow’s estate to vicar of Hanbury. Harry’s social mobility illustrates the problem of Lady Ludlow’s eventual acceptance of her clergyman’s educational reforms, which sees her grant him his Sunday school towards the end of the narrative: ‘For Mr. Horner’s sake, for Mr. Gray’s sake, and last, not least, for this lad’s sake, I will give the new plan a trial. Ask Mr. Gray to come up to me this afternoon about the land he wants.’¹²⁶ Whilst this acceptance seemingly supports Gaskell’s connection of conservative female philanthropy with the reforming ethos of present day Victorian England, it also undermines female power in the parochial sphere, even as Gaskell celebrates it. Gaskell’s argument in *My Lady Ludlow* that women are at the heart of social reform thus fails to answer whether Lady Ludlow’s acceptance of the

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 133-34.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

school indicates the demise of her authority, or merely her skilful adaption to circumstances.

The final scenes of *My Lady Ludlow* seek to resolve any uncertainties over the influence of the maternal philanthropist in her community, as well as establish her legacy of conservative reform. While Brontë's Shirley Keeldar and Caroline Helstone are crucially absent from their landscape at the conclusion of *Shirley*, Gaskell's closing vision of the philanthropic landed woman sees Lady Ludlow use her stately home to both move with the times and counter the prejudices of provincial society, by opening her estate to visits from the illegitimate Bessy Gibson and the Brooke family – Baptist bakers from Birmingham that she previously ostracised. These visits illustrate the influence of Lady Ludlow over the parochial sphere, and like the ending of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Gaskell offers a triumphant and empowered portrait of the maternal philanthropist. In a letter from Miss Galindo to Margaret Dawson, which describes a recent tea party at Hanbury Court, the authority Lady Ludlow exerts over her community is depicted as unrivalled:

Why, we had the parson of Clover, and the parson of Headleigh, and the parson of Merribank, and the three parsonesses; and Farmer Donkin, and the two Miss Donkins; and Mr. Gray (of course), and myself and Bessy; and Captain and Mrs. James; yes and Mr. and Mrs. Brooke; think of that! I am not sure the parsons liked it; but he was there. [...] By this time, I should tell you all the parsonesses were looking at Mrs. Brooke, for she had shown her want of breeding before; and the parsonesses, who were just a step above her in manners, were very much inclined to smile at her doings and sayings. Well! what does she do but pull out a clean Bandana pocket-handkerchief, all red and yellow silk; spread it over best silk gown – it was, like enough, a new one, [...] and Mrs. Parsoness of Headleigh – I forget her name, and its no matter, for she's an ill-bred creature, I hope Bessy will behave herself better – was right-down bursting with laughter, and as near a hee-haw as ever a donkey was; when what does my lady do? Ay! There's my own dear Lady Ludlow, God bless her! She takes out her own pocket-handkerchief, all snowy cambric, and lays it softly down on her velvet lap, for all the world as if she did it every day of her life,

just like Mrs. Brooke, the baker's wife; and when the one got up to shake the crumbs into the fireplace, the other did just the same. But with such a grace! And such a look at us all! Tom Diggles went red all over; and Mrs. Parsoness of Headleigh scarce spoke for the rest of the evening; and the tears came into my old silly eyes; and Mr. Gray, who was before silent and awkward in a way which I tell Bessy she must cure him of, was made so happy by this pretty action of my lady's that he talked away all the rest of the evening, and was the life of the company.¹²⁷

In copying the domestic mannerisms of the socially gauche Mrs. Brooke, Lady Ludlow exerts her protection over the baker's wife from class snobbery and defies the parsons and their wives to challenge her, who are of course, reduced to silence. It is thus in Lady Ludlow's newly flexible sense of propriety that we find evidence of her commitment to social progress, whilst remaining an authoritarian, conservative figure in the community. Although the comical, old-fashioned nature of Lady Ludlow appears to characterise her as belonging to the previous century, this account is deceptive, for embedded within this Hannah More-style philanthropist is an understanding that such women were the generators of change. Gaskell's use of the narrative of conservative reform here thus enables her to finally negate the question of the Lady Bountiful's status in Victorian society, since in simultaneously noting Lady Ludlow's death in 1814 and the documentation of Margaret Dawson's story by the unnamed contemporary female figure of *Round the Sofa*, Lady Ludlow remains an absence and a presence in the lives of Victorian women:

Alas! alas! I never saw my dear lady again. She died in eighteen hundred and fourteen, and Mr. Gray did not long survive her. [...]

As any one may guess, it had taken Mrs. Dawson several Monday evenings to narrate all this history of the days of her youth. Miss Duncan thought it would be a good exercise for me, both in memory and

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 196-98.

composition, to write out on Tuesday mornings all that I had heard the night before; and thus it came to pass that I have the manuscript of 'My Lady Ludlow' now lying by me.¹²⁸

While the reader is left searching for Shirley and Caroline in the margins of Brontë's novel by its conclusion, the ending of *My Lady Ludlow* offers a new vision of the female philanthropist's borderline position, which in its flexibility secures her legacy - both in her community and for future generations of Victorian women.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 198.

Chapter Three

Expanding the Parochial Sphere:

Charlotte Yonge's *The Clever Woman of the Family* and George Eliot's *Middlemarch*

The affirmative vision of a conservative yet reforming female philanthropy offered at the end of Elizabeth Gaskell's *My Lady Ludlow* resurfaces in Charlotte Yonge's 1865 novel *The Clever Woman of the Family* and George Eliot's 1871-2 epic of provincial life, *Middlemarch*. These two novels contain ambitious, desiring heroines who seek to find a place in public society via philanthropy. Such desire for a vocation distinguishes Yonge's Rachel Curtis and Eliot's Dorothea Brooke from earlier philanthropists like Lucilla Stanley, but also from Brontë's Caroline Helstone, whose need for work is voiced only after the apparent demise of her romantic hopes. Both Yonge and Eliot interweave the tradition of female philanthropy with the arguments given by Barbara Bodichon and Bessie Rayner Parkes of the Langham Place Group on the necessity of greater employment for women, which they represented in their periodical the *English Woman's Journal* and with their establishment of the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women (S.P.E.W.) in 1859.¹ Indeed, Eliot, who moved in the intellectual circles of Bodichon and Parkes, maintained an especially close friendship with Barbara Bodichon throughout her life. Nonetheless, this desire for public work and philanthropy is judged critically by Yonge and Eliot, and in both their novels their heroines learn the value of working within the local community. As with *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*, *The*

¹ *English Woman's Journal* (London: English Woman's Journal Company, 1858-1864).

Clever Woman of the Family and *Middlemarch* stress the significance of the parochial sphere to the lives of the gentlewoman. Whereas the public sphere in Yonge's and Eliot's novels is represented as a masculine space, the parochial sphere is defined as intrinsically maternal, and thus the most fitting arena for the work of Rachel and Dorothea. Crucially, while the female philanthropist is again depicted as a borderline figure in the two texts, this borderline status is celebrated by the authors, albeit for different reasons.

Yonge's and Eliot's emphasis on the parochial sphere reveals the continued importance of Hannah More to the identity and depiction of the gentlewoman by women writers of the 1860s and 1870s, and in many ways the positive image of female philanthropy and conservative reform found in *The Clever Woman of the Family* and *Middlemarch* suggests a closer, less complicated relationship with the writings of More than that expressed by Brontë's critical and ambivalent *Shirley*. Although as will be seen, More meant different things to Yonge and Eliot, ideas about maternalism, conservative reform and Sunday schools endure in the novels. Other aspects of More's Victorian reputation are also given a new emphasis by Yonge and Eliot, such as her identity as a bluestocking and her relationship with the overseas missionary movement. This reworking of Hannah More by Yonge and Eliot thus works to connect the earlier images of the female philanthropist with the later, professionalised vision of the charitable woman seen in the writings of Mrs. Humphry Ward, and discussed in the final chapter.

Charlotte Yonge's and George Eliot's discussions of female philanthropy are notable for the way in which they are informed by the burgeoning women's movement of the late 1850s and onwards. *The Clever Woman of the Family*

consciously – if ironically - engages with the aims and ideals of both the *English Woman's Journal* and S.P.E.W., whilst *Middlemarch* famously uses its historical setting of the run up to the First Reform Bill to examine society after the Second Reform Bill of 1867, and Parliament's rejection of the argument for female suffrage put forward by John Stuart Mill. As ideas about the 'true' social role of the gentlewoman were put forward and endlessly debated, Yonge and Eliot use their novels to insist on women's place in the parochial spaces of society via the traditional discourse of philanthropy but equally, both use this discourse to re-imagine and expand the parochial sphere to include new arenas of female action, which still conform to the 'world of the neighbourhood, workplace, or acquaintance networks'.² For Eliot, in her reform novel of *Middlemarch*, the sphere that Dorothea enters at the conclusion of the text can be viewed as both a domestic and a political one, as Dorothea engages with parliamentary life as the wife of an MP. For Yonge, the space she imagines for Rachel Curtis (later Keith) and her philanthropic ambitions is a regimental one, as Rachel marries an officer in the British army.

Both marriages affirm the parochial aspect of the female philanthropy narrative, but the marriage between philanthropist and officer in Yonge's novel also confirms and complicates Patrick Brantlinger's argument that the British Empire is central to the concerns of the nineteenth-century English novel, as Yonge's connection of India with rural Devon works to render the colony as yet another parochial sphere for the female philanthropist.³ Whilst the historian

² Lofland, p. 10.

³ See Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988). However, whilst Brantlinger pays attention to the works of individuals like Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope and Joseph Conrad, he does not offer much analysis of texts by female Victorian writers, or the domestic novel.

Antoinette Burton has documented the imperialist thinking of Victorian feminists (a thought process which can clearly be seen in the *English Woman's Journal* with such articles as 'Emigration as a Preventative Agency'), much less attention has been paid to the imperialism of women writers like Charlotte Yonge, who rejected the campaign for the vote and mocked the *English Woman's Journal* in her writings, but wholeheartedly supported the existence of female influence and its transmission via a global mission.⁴ Drawing out the colonial aspect of Yonge's representation of female philanthropy in *The Clever Woman of the Family* thus offers a new way of considering the philanthropic mission proposed by women like Hannah More and her successors. This imperial context to female philanthropy also provides a significant way of interpreting Dorothea Brooke and her desire for a colony in *Middlemarch*.

The spaces of action offered to the heroines at the conclusions of *The Clever Woman of the Family* and *Middlemarch* have been regarded critically by feminist commentators, as Yonge and Eliot are held up as participating in a reactionary shrinking of Rachel's and Dorothea's ambitions. Indeed, while I have drawn a distinction between these desiring female characters and such earlier female philanthropists as Lucilla Stanley and Caroline Helstone, both Rachel and Dorothea end up married at their novels' endings, and it is only in the role of wife that they are able to expand their philanthropic role by accessing these regimental and parliamentary spaces. Thus the inevitable marriage plot also endures in Yonge's and Eliot's discussions of female philanthropy. Yet rather

⁴ See Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994). Isa Craig, 'Emigration as a Preventive Agency', *English Woman's Journal*, Vol. II, No. 11 January 1859, pp. 289-97.

than reading these marriages as regressive, I see the vocational identities that Rachel and Dorothea derive from their personal relationships as further examples of the blurring between public and private spheres that occurs within the parochial spaces of the female philanthropic narrative. It is important to recognise that these marriages lead to new landscapes of opportunity for the philanthropic heroine, which strongly contrasts with the marriages of Lucilla Stanley, Caroline Helstone and Shirley Keeldar who all remain with the community of the landed gentry at the close of their tales. This difference exemplifies the sense of possibility in both Yonge's and Eliot's narratives, since even though their heroines are as susceptible to challenges from the men of their community as the earlier female philanthropists, these challenges (as with Gray's urging of reform on Lady Ludlow) help bring about Rachel's and Dorothea's closer relationship with the society around them.

Hence *The Clever Woman of the Family* and *Middlemarch* are not engaged with a conservative vision of women and society so much as visions of conservative reform, as women are depicted as central to gradual progress but also to the preservation of values that have come before. This sense of generation as well as preservation thus returns us to the figure of the mother, and the significance of the maternalist narrative already seen in the writings of individuals like Hannah More and Elizabeth Gaskell. As suggested, the presence of Hannah More hangs over both novels. Yonge was in fact writing a short biographical piece about Hannah More for her *Biographies of Good Women* series at the same time as writing *The Clever Woman of the Family*, and would subsequently produce a biography of More for the *Eminent Women Series* of biographies in 1888, as well as a story for Sunday school children about Hannah

and Martha More in 1890 entitled *The Cunning Woman's Grandson: A Tale of Cheddar a Hundred Years Ago*.⁵ For Eliot, by returning to her own ardent religious past in her representation of Dorothea, she also engaged with her earlier admiration of Hannah More, which will be examined more closely. Hannah More and her brand of female philanthropy is therefore vital to our understanding of the characters Rachel Curtis and Dorothea Brooke, but Yonge's and Eliot's novels also draw out new tensions and blurrings within More's legacy for the Victorians, as parochial female philanthropy is depicted as expanding into political and colonial space.

Charlotte Yonge

The Clever Woman of the Family (1865)

In her discussion of Charlotte Yonge's long and successful career as a novelist, Christabel Coleridge – friend, distant cousin and first biographer of Yonge – made one notable exception: Yonge's 1865 novel *The Clever Woman of the Family*. Coleridge's explanation for the text's absence from *Charlotte Mary Yonge: Her Life and Letters* (1903) can be found in a solitary footnote at the end of the chapter concerned with Yonge's life in the 1860s: 'Note. – The *Clever Woman of the Family*, published in 1865, should have been noticed here. Some people think it the cleverest of Miss Yonge's books, but there is a controversial element in it which, I think, detracts from the charm.'⁶ While Coleridge does not

⁵ Yonge, 'Hannah More', *Biographies of Good Women (Second Series)*, *Hannah More*, and *The Cunning Woman's Grandson: A Tale of Cheddar A Hundred Years Ago*.

⁶ Christabel Coleridge, *Charlotte Mary Yonge: Her Life and Letters*, (London: Macmillan and Co., 1903), p. 230.

elaborate on the meaning of this ‘controversial element’, Yonge’s novel has remained problematic for critics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries due to its derisive treatment of the heroine Rachel Curtis – the ‘clever woman’ of the story – and her ambitions. Yonge’s narrative can be seen to punish Rachel for her ambitious desires to transform public society on a wide scale, before offering her rehabilitation through the domestic identity of wife and mother, and this reading has led both Valerie Sanders and Jane Sturrock to term Yonge and *The Clever Woman of the Family* anti-feminist.⁷ In contrast to Sanders and Sturrock, Gavin Budge has more recently argued that Yonge and her novels should be read within the discourse of cultural feminism and also religious feminism, as he focuses on the significance of Yonge’s Tractarianism to her depictions of gender and society.⁸ While in many ways, reading Yonge as feminist is as unhelpful as reading her as anti-feminist, the polarity of these opinions underlines the controversy within Yonge’s work – especially for contemporary readers and critics who struggle with the author’s insistence on the inferiority of women in such texts as her 1876 essay collection *Womankind*:

Not that I have anything new to say – only that which is so old that it may seem new. I have no hesitation in declaring my full belief in the inferiority of woman, nor that she brought it upon herself.

I believe – as entirely as any other truth which has been from the beginning – that woman was created as help meet to man. How far she was then on an equality with him, no one can pretend to guess; but when the test came, whether the two human beings would pay allegiance to God or to the Tempter, it was the woman who was the first to fail, and to draw her husband into the same transgression. Thence her punishment of physical weakness and subordination, mitigated by the promise that she

⁷ Sanders, *Eve’s Renegades: Victorian Anti-Feminist Women Novelists*; Jane Sturrock, ‘Heaven and Home’: *Charlotte M. Yonge’s Domestic Fiction and the Victorian Debate over Women*, (Victoria, Canada: English Literary Studies, University of Victoria Press, 1995).

⁸ Gavin Budge, *Charlotte M. Yonge: Religion, Feminism and Realism in the Victorian Novel*, (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2007).

should be the means of bringing the Redeemer to renovate the world, and break the dominion of Satan.⁹

Despite Yonge's declaration in her 'full belief in the inferiority of woman', there is clearly more going on within this statement of female weakness, as Yonge also emphasises female strength and moral power to bring back 'the Redeemer to renovate the world, and break the dominion of Satan', thereby providing enough evidence to support both Sanders' and Budge's arguments. With this sense of the complexities of Yonge's writing in mind, it is therefore appropriate to reject any attempt to position the author as feminist or anti-feminist, as Nicola Thompson argues in her essay on the rereading of noncanonical woman novelists:

Traditionally and currently, we nevertheless tend to classify Victorian women's novels as either radical or conservative. For example, the domestic novel written by writers such as Charlotte Yonge is often disparaged as conservative and antifeminist, whereas the sensation novel [...] is celebrated as explosively radical; [...] All of these definitions are essentially labeling the novelists according to our perception of their ideological position and the labels unfortunately serve to distort the complexity of the historically specific discourses and contexts in which the novels are embedded.¹⁰

It is with the 'historically specific discourses and contexts' of Charlotte Yonge's writing in mind that I now turn to *The Clever Woman of the Family* and locate it within the tradition of conservative reform and the maternalist discourse of female philanthropy that was brought to prominence by Hannah More at the

⁹ Charlotte Yonge, *Womankind*, (London: Mozley and Smith, 1876), pp. 1-2.

¹⁰ Nicola Diane Thompson, 'Responding to the Woman Questions: Rereading Non-Canonical Victorian Women Novelists', in *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question*, ed. by Nicola Diane Thompson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 1-23, (p. 4).

beginning of the nineteenth century. Rather than regarding the shift of Rachel Curtis' ambitions from public to local as wholly repressive, I instead illustrate how the communal sphere for Yonge – as with many writers before her – was a significant social and reforming space for both men *and* women. The vibrancy of the communal sphere for Yonge is also maintained by Susan Walton (although with a different focus) in *Imagining Soldiers and Fathers in the Mid-Victorian Era: Charlotte Yonge's Models of Manliness*, as Walton insists that we should imagine Yonge,

Enveloped in a large, vibrant community of families ranging over the counties of Hampshire, Oxfordshire and Devonshire, with links out across the world. Nor are these families devoid of male presence; their homes were also the work-bases for the many doctors, vicars, lawyers, schoolmasters, landlords, farmers, and politicians [...] Add to this the position of the Yongs' house in Otterbourne on the main road from London to Southampton [...] their proximity to the major ports of Southampton and Portsmouth [...] and it becomes possible to envisage Charlotte Yonge's world associated with all the ongoing debates of the times [...] The society of which she was part may have been socially exclusive and numerically small compared to those other kinds of typical Victorian communities (the northern industrial towns, for example), but it was a network of immense influence in the life of the nation. She can be perceived at the heart rather than the peripheries of a significant strand of culture.¹¹

As Budge and Sturrock recognise, the community of *The Clever Woman of the Family* is intensely concerned with contemporary debates about middle-class women and work – a concern that both critics attribute to Yonge's Tractarianism or Anglo-Catholicism, which with its establishment of Anglican sisterhoods in the 1840s 'took the question of women's work very seriously'.¹² The journey that Rachel takes throughout Yonge's novel is thus not a

¹¹ Susan Walton, *Imagining Soldiers and Fathers in the Mid-Victorian Era: Charlotte Yonge's Models of Manliness*, (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2010), p. 16.

¹² Sturrock, p. 49.

relinquishment of her ambitions, but rather an education as to where best they can be exercised and the true nature of women's work, which for Yonge is at its most effective when motivated by local, maternal and religious feeling. Although the narrative of *The Clever Woman of the Family* is focused on 'cutting Rachel down to size' as Sanders states, since Yonge's heroine must learn to reject the allure of the traditionally masculine spheres that she seeks to occupy, as well as accept the value of male guidance, this 'cutting down' of Rachel does not involve the repression of female ambition, but rather the transformation of its setting.¹³

Crucially, there are subtleties to Yonge's insistence on the need for women to have male advisers and her rejection of Rachel's desire to work in the public sphere. *The Clever Woman of the Family* reveals the need to listen to the *right* male advice, which Yonge found in her relationships with her father and the Tractarian leader John Keble, who was a member of her local clergy. A large part of the failure of Rachel's philanthropy is attributed to her relentless rivalry with the men of her community for ultimate authority, which sees her instead accept the counsel of the seemingly acquiescent stranger Mr. Mauleverer, who is later unmasked as the conman Maddox and symbolises all that is corrupt in Yonge's vision of society. Likewise, Yonge's denial of the public sphere for her heroine is complicated by the fact that this setting is represented as 'dangerous both physically and spiritually' for men *and* women throughout the novel, as Yonge's heroes (in particular Colonel Keith and Alick Keith) are praised more for their tenderness and their understanding of 'domestic values'.¹⁴

¹³ Sanders, *Eve's Renegades*, p. 66.

¹⁴ Sturrock, pp. 98-99.

The transformation of Rachel's ambition is achieved partly by Yonge's use of the language of woman's mission. This language underlines the relationship between Yonge and More, as Yonge's idea of the mission takes on an increasingly imperial form as the novel progresses. As Alison Twells has indicated, More maintained close connections with overseas missionaries and regarded her own work in the Mendips as part of the same 'civilising mission'.¹⁵ Twells' account of the growing dominance of the missionary narrative into the mid-nineteenth-century is significant not only for highlighting More's and Yonge's use of this discourse in their representation of women's philanthropy, but sheds important light on the imperial context of *The Clever Woman of the Family*, which is littered with references to the British Empire, and in particular, India and the 'mutiny' of 1857.¹⁶ Twells demonstrates how home and away are brought into close contact via the missionary narratives of domestic and foreign reformers, which were at once 'public and familial, domestic and global, simultaneously involving intimate and very distant concerns'.¹⁷ Significantly, Twells reads such texts as *The Mendip Annals*, which sees Martha More describe the parish of Nailsea as 'our little Sierra Leone', as using the lexicon of the missionary to help carve out 'a new sphere for social action and intervention'.¹⁸ While this argument is appropriate for the late-eighteenth-century world of the More sisters, it cannot be applied to Yonge's use of imperial and missionary

¹⁵ Alison Twells, *The Civilising Mission and the English Middle Class, 1792-1850: The 'Heathen' at Home and Overseas*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 1-2.

¹⁶ However it is important to note that the missionary movements that Hannah More was associated with were of a more Evangelical nature, whereas Charlotte Yonge's affinity lay with the High Church mission of The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. For more information about Yonge's relationship with the missionary movement see Walton, pp. 143-44.

¹⁷ Twells, p. 3

¹⁸ Martha More, p. 42; Twells, p. 6.

imagery to depict 1860s' Devon, which by then, could hardly be termed a 'new sphere' for female philanthropy. Instead, Yonge's employment of these traditional images and comparisons illustrates her attempts to grant greater value to the parochial sphere, and female work within it, at a time when whole new vistas of opportunity were opening up for female philanthropy and social activism.

Simultaneous to Yonge's investment in an 'old sphere' of women's work via the narrative of missionary philanthropy, the author also uses the same connections between India and Devon in her novel to domesticate the role of the British Army in maintaining the empire, and thus expand her notion of the parochial sphere into the colonies. This redefinition of the domestic and expansion of the parochial gives credence to Suzanne Daly's arguments for the centrality of India to the understanding of English identity in the nineteenth century with India being 'woven deeply into the texture of English domesticity'.¹⁹ Indeed, the arrival of members from the -th regiment, which has recently served in India and crucially, was serving during the Sepoy rebellion, into Devon, is closely connected to Rachel's perception of her position in the local community, as both her understanding of womanhood and feelings for Officer Alick Keith undergo dramatic and connected transformation whilst the narrative progresses. As Yonge's *Womankind* demonstrates, the officer's wife and her role in the community is a powerful image in Yonge's conception of the true role of women in society, and the description in this later text sheds further

¹⁹ Suzanne Daly, *The Empire Inside: Indian Commodities in Victorian Domestic Novels*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), p. 5.

light on Rachel's new-found mission at the end of *The Clever Woman of the Family*:

Every Christian has to be the salt of the earth. How much may women serve to be the salt of their homes and the society in which they live, above all in the isolation in which the wives of officers are often left, with strongly defined positions and much influence for good or evil, both on the young subalterns far away from home, and on the soldiers' wives. Happily there is an increasing sense of responsibility in these days, and many women in all places and stations have awakened to the sense that each has her world of duty, and that pleasing her husband and making him comfortable and attending to her children is only part of her office; but that what she *is*, the opinions she utters, the influence she exerts, have a power for which she is accountable.²⁰

Notably, in this description of the duties of the military wife there is very little sense of the world beyond the regiment – women's 'influence' is depicted as exercised only over the 'young subalterns' (meaning in this context, junior officers) and 'on the soldiers' wives'. Oddly enough, when one considers the growing concern about Indian women from the 1850s onwards, as documented by Anna Johnston and Antoinette Burton, Yonge's depiction of the military wife does not describe her influence over peoples outside the army, or as the rescuer of native women from 'savage' customs, and yet both visions were increasingly important to the ideology of empire from the mid-nineteenth-century onwards.²¹ This absence will be shown to have implications for *The Clever Woman of the Family* and its representation of parochial female philanthropy. Crucially, it would seem to imply that once Rachel becomes the wife of Alick Keith she both possesses a 'power' that is real and 'accountable', and yet at the same time a power that is bounded by the limits of the regimental community. Yonge thus

²⁰ Yonge, *Womankind*, pp. 297-8.

²¹ See Burton, *Burdens of History* and Anna Johnston, *Missionary Writing and Empire, 1800-1860*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2003).

offers her readers a parochial vision of empire, which sees Rachel move out from Devon into another equally empowering but limited sphere.

At the opening of the novel, we see Rachel impatiently awaiting the return of her cousin Fanny, who has spent the last nine years in India as the wife of General Sir Stephen Temple. Now a widow and mother of seven, Fanny returns to her native country to live near her aunt and two cousins. Not much has been heard of Fanny since her absence, and her family in England have ‘a general impression that she had much ill-health and numerous children, and was tended like an infant by her bustling mother and doting husband.’ This sense of Fanny’s helplessness informs Rachel’s plans for her cousin’s arrival – when told of Fanny’s impending visit Rachel announces, ‘My mission has come to seek me’, as the task of caring for her vulnerable cousin and many children appears to promise the fulfilment of Rachel’s burning ambition.²² Indeed, even before Fanny arrives, Rachel decides that she will be the one to educate the Temple brood and thus as Clare Simmons notes, ‘Rachel begins with a civilising mission: she will teach the colonials – Indian-born Fanny and her sons, raised in India, South Africa, and Australia – to be English gentry.’²³ However – and rather inevitably – it is Rachel who must learn from the seemingly helpless Fanny, who in fact personifies Yonge’s ideal of a military wife and quickly punctures Rachel’s dreams of her first mission. Unlike Rachel, Fanny is presented as an intensely maternal figure, and with her maternity she maintains a power over her household that Rachel can only dream of, as she fails spectacularly to gain authority over the Temple children, whom she has claimed

²² Yonge, *The Clever Woman of the Family*, p. 40.

²³ Clare Simmons, ‘Introduction’, in *The Clever Woman of the Family*, Charlotte Yonge, (Ontario: Broadview Press Ltd, 2001), pp. 7-26, (p. 23).

as hers to educate. Whereas Rachel desires to discipline Fanny's children by the way of her theories of education, Fanny desires only for them to stay at home with her for as long as possible and to be educated by a governess who 'must be kind to the poor boys'.²⁴ As Clare Simmons suggests, Fanny appears as something of a pathetic, 'cloyingly sweet' character to the modern reader, but in the world of Charlotte Yonge, it is Fanny who continues to rule as 'a sort of little queen in her way' amongst the men of her husband's regiment.²⁵ This reference to Fanny's queen-like status in her regimental community also underlines the fact that she derives some of her authority from her position as Lady Temple, the widow of Sir Stephen Temple, and thus calls to mind the power experienced by another titled philanthropist of this study, Lady Ludlow. Once again, titles and maternal philanthropy are seen to enable significant authority for women in the parochial sphere.

Crucially for Yonge however, whilst Fanny demonstrates her influence over the domestic and community spheres, she remains conscious of the need for strong male guidance, which she seeks first in her husband (a man forty-four years her senior), and latterly in the loyal and wise Colonel Keith, who of course, Rachel regards as her greatest rival for much of the novel and frequently seeks to challenge his influence over the women of her community: 'Rachel's teeth were set to receive her enemy'.²⁶ Although Yonge's unqualified praise of the Temple marriage makes for uncomfortable reading, Fanny's ability to recognise true wisdom and authority in the novel's male characters acts as an important contrast to Rachel, who repeatedly takes on the persona of the male adviser herself, or –

²⁴ Yonge, *Clever Woman*, p. 56.

²⁵ Simmons, p. 14; Yonge, *Clever Woman*, p. 168.

²⁶ Yonge, *Clever Woman*, p. 110.

more disastrously – accepts the wrong sort of man as her counsellor. Fanny Temple’s balance between maternal influence and womanly submission is thus the sort of cleverness that Rachel will have to learn in order to find a meaningful outlet for her yearnings to do some good in society.

The other female figure that Rachel must learn from is Ermine Williams who, Jane Sturrock describes as ‘Yonge’s ideal of intellectual femininity’.²⁷ The character of Ermine thus complicates the reading of Yonge and her novels as anti-feminist, since Ermine’s success as a writer and editor clearly endorses professional occupations for women. Like Rachel, Ermine is an intelligent, well-read woman – the only difference is in Ermine’s thoughtful, modest way of forming and articulating her opinions. The connection between the two women is established early in their relationship where we are told that Ermine and Rachel ‘seemed to have a sort of natural desire to rub their minds one against the other’.²⁸ Rachel’s respect for Ermine suggests her potential for improvement as the narrative progresses – learning to behave more like Ermine herself – an idea that is underlined by Ermine’s own assessment of her friend as ‘just what I should have been without papa and Edward [her brother] to keep me down [...] I feel for her longing to be up and doing, and her puzzled chafing against constraint and conventionality, though it breaks out in very odd effervescences’.²⁹ Ermine’s compassion for Rachel’s desire to ‘be up and doing’ however, highlights a key area of tension in Ermine’s characterisation, since the young intellectual woman is quite literally, unable to be ‘up and doing’ herself, as she has been confined to a wheelchair for the past twelve years after an

²⁷ Sturrock, p. 65.

²⁸ Yonge, *Clever Woman*, p. 96.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 168.

irreversible accident at the age of eighteen. Ermine is thus one of Yonge's favourite stock female characters: the submissive, moral invalid who improves all who come into contact with her (seen also with Margaret May in *The Daisy Chain* and Cherry Underwood in *The Pillars of the House*). Unlike Rachel, Ermine's wheelchair signifies her happy resignation to the world of the parochial, as well as her refusal to force herself into more masculine, public spaces. Ermine symbolises the positive interpretation of women's borderline citizenship offered by *The Clever Woman of the Family*, as the tension between her moral intellect and her physical incapacity illustrates both Ermine's powerful influence in her community and over her readers, but also her inability to dominate or challenge masculine accomplishments. Even in her writing, Ermine takes the pseudonym 'The Invalid', as if to symbolise her passivity and crucially, when she takes up the editorship of the journal the *Traveller*, which by its very title suggests movement and freedom, she asks Colonel Keith to copy up her letters to the journal's contributors, since her handwriting 'betrays womanhood'.³⁰ It is emphasised that Ermine writes out of financial necessity to support herself, her sister and her niece, as opposed to being motivated by egotism, and that she confines her writing to appropriate 'womanly' topics. Ermine's approach to authorship mirrors that of Yonge, who used her earnings from her own womanly novels to fund charitable enterprises, such as the construction of the Melanesian missionary ship the *Southern Cross* from the proceeds of *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853).³¹

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 166.

³¹ Charlotte Yonge, *The Heir of Redclyffe*, (London: John. W Parker, 1853). For a discussion of Yonge and the Melanesian mission see Walton pp. 155-59.

Ermine's discrete, feminine approach to her authorship acts as a significant contrast to Rachel's own pompous attempts to publish her articles on 'Curatocult', a word she has invented to attack the worship of curates by ignorant female parishioners. As with many of the other texts of this study, Yonge's female philanthropist finds herself in contest with the curate Mr. Touchett over the rule of her community. This contest is seen early on in the text, as Rachel and Touchett clash over the education of Fanny's children, as well as over the young boys of the community – Touchett wanting them for his choir, and Rachel for her school:

her class on Sunday mornings and two evenings in the week had long been in operation before the reign of Mr. Touchett. Then two lads, whose paternal fiddles had seceded to the Plymouth Brethren, were suspended from all advantages by the curate [...] but even this was less annoying than the summons at the class-room door every Sunday morning that, in the midst of her lesson, carried off the chief of her scholars to practise their chants.³²

Yet rather than depicting Rachel as a victim of unwarranted male attacks, Yonge criticises her heroine for setting herself up against the Church. While it is made clear that Rachel's complaints about Touchett are valid, as he is depicted as both ineffective and vulgar, Rachel's challenge to his authority is presented as unacceptable when contrasted with Ermine's refusal to voice her own criticisms of the curate publicly. For Yonge, deeply committed to her Tractarian faith, Rachel's questioning of Church hierarchies and institutions only reveals how far from her womanly duties she has strayed: 'to venerate the man for his office's sake was nearly as hard to Ermine as to herself, though the office was more esteemed.'³³ Indeed, Rachel's antagonism towards Touchett is later revealed as a

³² Yonge, *Clever Woman*, p. 97.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 96.

symptom of her own loss of faith, which has been brought about by her reading of ‘poisonous’ books without masculine advice or guidance.³⁴

Rachel’s subsequent establishment of the *Journal of Female Industry* further underscores the gulf between herself and Ermine. Rachel intends to use her journal to fund and publicise her philanthropic institution the Female Union for Lace-maker’s Employment, or F.U.L.E. as she unwittingly abbreviates it, before changing the title to the Female Union for Englishwoman’s Employment after advice from Alick Keith. As Jane Sturrock has commented, F.U.L.E. is evidently Yonge’s version of S.P.E.W., which both reaffirms Rachel’s connections to the women of Langham Place, and deflates the Langham Place Group’s aspirations.³⁵ Likewise, the focus of Rachel’s magazine on female employment also connects it to the *English Woman’s Journal*, which contained numerous articles on the subject. From the outset of Rachel’s philanthropic project, Yonge hints at its problems. Having given up on the education of Fanny’s boys, Rachel becomes acquainted with the apparent clergyman Mr. Mauleverer (actually the conman Maddox), who, as Clare Simmons notes, in a reworking of the sort of rescue and seduction scene found in Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*, aids Rachel to safety after she becomes stranded on the cliffs near her house.³⁶ Mauleverer’s seduction of Rachel is a philanthropic one, as Rachel comes to believe in their shared concern for the local female lace makers and quickly regards her companion as ‘a kindred spirit of philanthropy’. While there are concerns voiced early on by Rachel’s friends that Maddox is heard to

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 174.

³⁵ Sturrock, p. 63.

³⁶ See Simmons, p. 18 for an expansion on the connections between the works of Charlotte Yonge and Jane Austen. See also, Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, (London: T. Egerton, 1811; repr. London: Penguin, 2004).

be 'a clerical gentleman who had opinions' and is thus an unorthodox Christian, Yonge's heroine refuses to countenance these concerns.³⁷ This willingness of Rachel's to acquaint herself with Mauleverer's unorthodoxy both reinforces her problematic relationship with the Church in Yonge's novel, and stresses her movement beyond the 'true' role of woman in her relationship with the man. Rachel is seen to be won over by Mauleverer's willingness to discuss and take seriously her plans of doing something notable for female employment, and her facility in using the language of social science is contrasted with her inability to properly judge Mauleverer's character in a series of exchanges between them:

'The only means that seems to me likely to mitigate the evil,' continued Rachel, charmed at having the most patient listener who had ever fallen to her lot, 'would be to commence an establishment where some fresh trades might be taught, so as to lessen the glut of the market, and to remove the workers that are forced to undersell one another, and thus oblige the buyers to give a fairly remunerative price.'

'Precisely my own views.'³⁸

Mauleverer panders both to Rachel's philanthropic desires and her strong ambitions for a role in the public sphere. His suggestion of creating an asylum where young girls would be taught new 'handicrafts' to secure a better livelihood, as well as the setting up of a journal to make the whole scheme 'self-supporting' illustrates the problem of female ambition in *The Clever Woman of the Family*, for the way in which it blinds Rachel to the true nature of woman's mission as noble, generous and self-sacrificing:

In all truth and candour, the relief to the victims to lace-making was her primary object, far before all besides, and the longing desire of her heart

³⁷ Yonge, *Clever Woman*, p. 207; p. 211.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 224.

for years seemed about to be fulfilled; but a domestic magazine, an outlet to all the essays on Curatocult, on Helplessness, on Female Folly, and Female Rights, was a development of the plan beyond her wildest hopes! No dull editor to hamper, reject or curtail! She should be as happy and as well able to expand on the Invalid herself.³⁹

These insinuations about the real state of affairs behind Rachel's vision of F.U.E.E amplify however, once the asylum is established and the narrative takes on a more disquieting aspect. To Rachel's disappointment, the asylum is located not in her home town of Avonmouth, but further away at St. Norbert's, which she can only access by arranging transport. Rachel's disappointment is voiced in terms of her own personal deprivation, as she had planned to 'be in and out constantly, daily teaching and watching the girls, and encouraging them by learning the employment herself', but the narrator implies more sinister consequences of this distant location, as the three girl pupils are removed from the maternal influence of such philanthropists as Fanny Temple and Ermine's sister Alison, but also the protection of the clergy, since St Norbert's is on the edge of the parish borders and suffers from clerical neglect.⁴⁰ The anti-maternal, extra-parochial aspect of the asylum continues to be emphasised, as the mothers and guardians of the pupils increasingly complain about the lack of visits between Avonmouth and St. Norbert's and the children are forbidden to return home for Christmas. The significance of this particular assault on family life is demonstrated by the outrage of the motherly and gentle Alison Williams who appeals, 'Some one ought to take it up [...] Who knows what may be done to

³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 229.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 237.

those poor children?’⁴¹ Alison’s righteous indignation offers a worrying indication of the sort of practices hidden from view at Rachel’s F.U.E.E. at the hands of her ‘kindred spirit of philanthropy’.⁴²

In conjunction with the insinuations about the F.U.E.E.’s antagonism towards genuine, maternal philanthropy, imperial images increasingly surface in connection with Rachel’s asylum. Yonge’s novel is set against the backdrop of British Empire, which she celebrates via images of its noble military men and missionaries. But *The Clever Woman of the Family* is also set against the lingering trauma of the Indian ‘Mutiny’, and its repercussions upon the imperialist psyche are plainly evident in Yonge’s narrative in relation to Rachel’s attempts at philanthropy. As with the British Army’s presence in India, Rachel’s mission to the labouring poor of her community is threatened by a dangerous, racial Other, in the form of Mrs. Rawlins, who has been hired by Mauleverer to live with and superintend the children day-to-day as they learn their new work in the asylum. Like Fanny Temple, Mrs. Rawlins is a young widow and mother, and appears to be the perfect carer for Rachel’s first pupils. Indeed, Fanny warms to Mrs. Rawlins directly upon meeting her, and it is not until the woman is met by Colonel Keith, that she is viewed more suspiciously, thereby reaffirming the significance of masculine judgment to Yonge’s narrative. Having served during the mutiny, Keith sees a likeness between Mrs. Rawlins and one of its perpetrators and attempts to warn Rachel:

‘She is a handsome woman, and reminds me strongly of a face I saw in India.’

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 317.

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 207.

‘There are some classes of beauty and character that have a remarkable sameness of feature,’ began Rachel.

‘Don’t push that theory, for your matron’s likeness was a very handsome sepoy havildar, whom we took at Lucknow; a capital soldier before the mutiny, and then an ineffable ruffian.’⁴³

In linking Mrs. Rawlins to a sepoy havildar, or native Indian soldier serving in the British army, Keith plays on fears of dangerous savages existing within British society, and these racialised images of the woman increase as her cruel treatment of the children is revealed. It later transpires that Mrs. Rawlins is in fact Maria Hatherton, a woman of ‘gipsy’ origin and from a family of squatters – an important fact missed by Suzanne Daly, who insists on the ‘Englishness’ of Maria in her analysis of the character and her relationship with India.⁴⁴ As the lover of Mauleverer and mother of his illegitimate daughter, Maria Hatherton is as far from the pure Fanny as possible – an idea underscored by the revelation of the woman’s violent beatings and starvation of the children under her care. Maria’s violence and sexuality symbolise the dangers of Rachel’s ambitious, unfeminine philanthropy, as well as serve to continue to link the heroine to questions of impropriety that will prove problematic for her later.

Yonge further illustrates the perversion of both Maria Hatherton’s character and Rachel’s scheme in a knowing allusion to the Sunday school work of Hannah More, which in contrast to the views of her author, Rachel voices scorn for throughout the novel: ‘I have pottered about cottages and taught in schools in the dilettante way of the young lady who thinks it her duty to be

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 319.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 310; Daly, p. 59.

charitable; and I am told that it is my duty, and that I may be satisfied.’⁴⁵ As another mother complains to Rachel about not being able to see her child after moving her to the asylum to learn a new trade, the mother worries that ‘they do say that Mr. Maw-and-liver is a kidnapper, and that he gets them poor children to send out to Botany Bay to be wives to the convicts as are transported’.⁴⁶ As Henry Thompson’s biography of More and also *The Mendip Annals* demonstrates, rumours that the More sisters’ establishment of Sunday schools was in fact a ploy to deport children overseas abounded in the early years of their work – something that Yonge also references in her biographical piece on Hannah More in the 1865 anthology *Biographies of Good Women (Second Series)*: ‘As to the villagers, some of them fancied that the ladies would have a claim over their children after seven years attendance, and send them beyond sea for slaves’.⁴⁷ While Yonge’s use of this rumour in her novel can be seen to mock the credulity of the uneducated working classes (as it does in Thompson’s and Patty More’s texts), there is a crucial difference between Hannah More’s Sunday schools and Rachel’s asylum for female employment – namely that More’s schools actually succeed in educating their pupils. In contrast, Rachel’s institution fails to teach the children any new trade and in fact secretly forces them to continue with their lace making but now without payment. By alluding to the work of Hannah More, Yonge highlights the spectacular failure of her heroine’s approach to woman’s mission, as the example of More’s maternal philanthropy points to the serious flaws at the heart of Rachel’s visions.

⁴⁵ Yonge, *Clever Woman*, pp. 37-38.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 321.

⁴⁷ Yonge, ‘Hannah More’, p. 309. See also Henry Thompson, *Hannah More*, p. 92, and Martha More, p. 28.

Moreover, the connection between the asylum and Botany Bay – the New South Wales penal colony – draws again on the threat of dangerous, foreign ‘others’ in Yonge’s narrative brought about by Rachel’s philanthropy.

Emboldened by the pleas of the mothers to see their children, it is the timid Fanny who finally reveals the truth about the F.U.E.E. and rescues the children from their slave labour. Accompanied by the equally maternal Alison Williams, Fanny justifies her plan of a surprise visit to the asylum in terms that stress personal responsibility and local connections: ‘And indeed, after what Mrs. Kelland said, I could not sleep while I thought I had been the means of putting any poor child into such hands.’ Although Alison initially marvels at Fanny’s courage, it soon becomes clear that Fanny’s maternal power within the domestic sphere, as well as her former position in her husband’s regiment in India, perfectly equips her to gain control of the asylum and access the imprisoned children where others had previously failed: ‘But timid and tender as she might be, it was not for nothing that Fanny Temple had been a vice-queen, so much accustomed to be welcomed wherever she penetrated, that the notion of a rebuff never suggested itself.’⁴⁸ Once inside the asylum, Fanny reveals the social power possessed by women of status by exploiting her title of Lady Temple to insist on seeing the children away from the superintendence of Maria Hatherton. As Fanny hears the children’s stories of abuse, she quickly removes them into her carriage before authoritatively informing the ‘native’ Maria of her actions – ‘outmanoeuvring’ the female villain as Daly notes, with ‘bold military tactics’.⁴⁹ Fanny’s strength however, falters once she, Alison and the children escape in the

⁴⁸ Yonge, *Clever Woman*, p. 335.

⁴⁹ Daly, p. 58.

carriage, as her vice-queen authority is lost in her misery at the pain of the children, thereby enabling the return of her more traditionally feminine character: ‘Lady Temple looked at Mary’s attenuated hand, and fairly sobbed’. Indeed, Fanny’s courage is seen to fail throughout the journey to the extent that she desires the guidance of Colonel Keith, so further reaffirming the necessity of masculine advice even when empowered by maternal feeling: ‘she uttered more than once the fervent wish that the Colonel had been there, for he would have known what to do. And Alison each time replied, “I wish it with all my heart!”’⁵⁰

Yonge maintains an imperialist frame around the failure of Rachel’s mission with the exclamation of Fanny’s son Conrade to Rachel as they arrive at her house with the rescued children that ‘Oh, Aunt Rachel, your F.U. thing is as bad as the Sepoys. But we have saved the two little girls that they were whipping to death, and have got them in the carriage.’⁵¹ Conrade’s connection of Maria Hatherton’s abuse with the rebellion of the Sepoys does not suggest, as Simmons argues, that in Yonge’s novel ‘Britain is not so different from India after all’, but rather illustrates the sense of horror and chaos attached to Rachel’s masculine form of philanthropy.⁵² For Yonge, as with many of her contemporaries, the mutiny appeared as an example of the natural order of society overturned. Significant to the author’s connection of it with female philanthropy in England, is, as both Jenny Sharpe and Anna Johnston have noted, the ‘feminisation’ of the mutiny in English media, as accounts of attacks on English women were circulated despite little supporting evidence:

⁵⁰ Yonge, *Clever Woman* p. 338; p. 339.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 340.

⁵² Simmons, p. 26.

During the 1857 revolt, the idea of rebellion was so closely imbricated with the violation of English womanhood that the Mutiny was remembered as a barbaric attack on innocent white women. Yet Magistrates commissioned to investigate the so-called eyewitness reports could find no evidence to substantiate the rumours of rebels raping, torturing, and mutilating English women.⁵³

As the ‘sepoy havildar’ and ‘gypsy’ Maria beats and starves little English girls, it is apparent that Rachel’s visions of public philanthropy have brought about another violent overturning of the natural order, as once again English girlhood is violated, although this time by the masculine ambitions of a misguided woman, which have enabled and supported such violence. Yonge’s narrative depends upon her true Englishwomen to restore order to the community, as Fanny rescues the children and the maternally-minded Alison Williams reforms Maria through visiting her in prison – helping her to repent ‘entirely’.⁵⁴

The dramatic and violent end to Rachel’s philanthropy brings about a crisis of identity within Yonge’s heroine, which ultimately leads to her rejection of the ‘clever woman’ mantle and her desire to penetrate typically masculine spheres of action. Crucial to Yonge’s veneration of maternalism, when confronted with the child victim of Maria Hatherton and Mauleverer, Lovedy Kelland, Rachel’s sole concern becomes the nursing of Lovedy back to health. Yet the adoption of a maternal role towards a child Rachel previously only saw as a victim of a system is not enough to ensure Rachel’s rehabilitation into proper womanhood for Charlotte Yonge. Indeed, in taking Lovedy’s nursing upon herself, some vestige of Rachel’s ego remains, as she ignores Fanny’s ‘urgent’ advice ‘that the doctor should be sent for’, since predictably, Rachel is

⁵³ Jenny Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 2. See also Anna Johnston, p. 51.

⁵⁴ Yonge, *Clever Woman*, p. 502.

engaged in ‘a deadly feud’ with her local practitioner and because ‘there was a spark of consolation in having a patient all to herself and her homeopathic book’.⁵⁵ The consolation of nursing Lovedy back to health to amend for placing her in such danger is soon lost to Rachel however, as it emerges that the cold Rachel diagnosed her charge with is in fact diphtheria – the illness successfully recognised by Alick Keith, who has experience of the disease from life in his regiment. The doctor arrives too late and Lovedy dies in Rachel’s bedroom. The cruel and unnecessary death of the child is shocking enough in Yonge’s narrative, but it is the deathbed scene itself that most disturbingly explores the implications of Rachel’s ‘clever’ philanthropy. Close to death, Lovedy makes three statements of faith that the female philanthropist is unable to respond to. First, Lovedy says to her carer, ‘Please, ma’am, don’t fret, I’m going to poor mother’ in Heaven, and Rachel can only answer with the assurance that Lovedy will soon ‘be better’ even though she is ‘conscious that this was not the right thing’. Later Lovedy makes two requests from Rachel for spiritual comfort – for ‘the verse about the tears’ and to be told ‘of my Saviour’. In both instances Rachel fails to provide reassurance – ‘her whole memory seemed scared away’ and she struggles to find the words and meaning of Christian comfort, which it is left to the appropriately named Dr. Macvicar to provide instead:

Even the words of hope and prayer for which the child’s eyes craved from both her fellow-watchers seemed to her a strange tongue, inefficient to reach the misery of this untimely mortal agony, this work of neglect and cruelty – and she the cause.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 347.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 356-57.

As Rachel herself then succumbs to diphtheria also, she is haunted by her failure to carry out the role of philanthropist in her community, as well as by her lack of faith, which has been long destroyed by her untrammelled, solitary intellectual pursuits. Physically weak and forced to be doctored by the very people she used to scorn, Rachel undergoes a severe period of mortification, which sees her floundering and insecure:

‘Tell me of my Saviour,’ the dying child had said; and the drawn face had lightened at the words to which Rachel’s oracles declared that people attached crude or arbitrary meanings; and now she hardly knew what they conveyed to her, and longed, as something far away, for the reality of those simple teachings – once realities, now all by rote! Saved by faith! What was faith? Could all depend on a last sensation? And as to her life. Failure, failure through headstrong blindness and self-will, resulting in the agony of the innocent. Was this ground of hope? She tried to think of progress and purification beyond the grave; but this was the most speculative, insecure fabric of all.⁵⁷

After giving evidence against Maddox in court, Rachel passes a night of terror where she imagines herself as Maria Hatherton – guilty and sentenced for savage child cruelty in front of a ‘world of gazing faces, feverishly magnified, multiplied, and pressing closer and closer on her’. This nightmare association with the dangerous racial Other chastens Rachel and she wakes wishing desperately to be more like her gentle cousin: ‘Oh, for simple genuine charity like Fanny’s, with eyes clear with innocence and humility!’⁵⁸ Having learnt the true value of Fanny’s maternal identity and her gentle, feminine conduct, Rachel is thus ready in the terms of Yonge’s narrative to receive and accept a proposal of marriage from Alick Keith. No longer sure of her identity and still grappling

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 372.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 408.

with her faith, Alick appears in the midst of Rachel's emotional and nervous breakdown and offers her a different vision of herself and her role in life. While this marriage proposal has been viewed suspiciously by feminist critics like Valerie Sanders who regard it as a curtailment of Rachel's energetic independence and dependent upon her new 'chastened' status, Alick's declaration of love to Rachel is in fact framed by ideas of work and service.⁵⁹ Unlike most of the other characters (with the exception of Ermine Williams) Alick has always appreciated Rachel's need to do good in the world, and his vision of their future together has little to do with domestic isolation but rather, offers a potential fusion of private and public missions. Crucially, this vision is located within Alick's life as a soldier and depends upon Rachel becoming a soldier's wife, thus further indicating the significance of the regiment to Yonge's expanded image of the parochial sphere:

‘Oh! Oh! I never thought of this.’
 ‘No,’ he said, ‘and I know what you do think of it, but indeed you need not be wasted. Our women and children want so much done for them, and none of our ladies are able or willing. Will you not come and help me?’
 ‘Don’t talk to me of helping! I do nothing but spoil and ruin.’
 ‘Not now! That is all gone and past. Come and begin afresh.’⁶⁰

Alick's reference to 'Our women and children' however, signals the tension inherent to Yonge's expanded parochial sphere, as Rachel's work as a soldier's wife in a regiment recently returned from India is phrased solely in terms of the regimental community – there is no suggestion of a role for Rachel in the society outside of the British Army. As noted earlier, this is despite the fact

⁵⁹ Valerie Sanders, 'Marriage and the Anti-Feminist Woman Novelist', in *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question*, ed. by Nicola Diane Thompson, pp. 24-41, (p. 30).

⁶⁰ Yonge, *Clever Woman*, p. 410.

that English women were becoming increasingly concerned about the plight of their 'native' sisters, and that 'by the 1860s Britain [...] had developed a keener sense of moral responsibility for its Indian subjects.'⁶¹ When one considers Antoinette Burton's claim that Victorian feminists sought 'to legitimate the women's movement' by references 'to India, to the colonies' and to 'Britain's worldwide civilising mission', this absence of a wider, more activist role for Rachel as Alick's wife is easily explained, since it so flagrantly challenges Yonge's vision of feminine influence and true womanhood.⁶² Yet in addition to this explanation, if Rachel's work as an officer's wife is depicted as complimenting women's work in the parochial spaces of England, then Alick's desire for Rachel to help the army's women and children is a logical one, as it conforms with *The Clever Woman of the Family's* emphasis on *local* philanthropy, as opposed to wide-sweeping social visions. By expanding the parochial sphere of her philanthropist to include the world of the regiment and the colonies, by necessity Yonge must also ensure that the community of the female philanthropist remains a bounded one.

When we see Rachel Keith in the final chapter, four years have passed since the disaster of her female asylum for employment and it is evident from her conversation with Ermine, that much of Alick's vision of their marriage has come true. As Rachel informs her friend about the meetings she has organised for soldiers' wives and also discusses the complexities of her position – 'I found it was so impossible to know about character, or to be sure that one was not doing more harm' – Yonge emphasises the active, influential role Rachel has

⁶¹ Johnston, p. 5.

⁶² Burton, p. 6.

within her husband's regiment, which suggests something of Fanny's earlier position as vice queen to her husband and his men in India. This idea of Rachel taking a more nuanced approach to her mission and her relationship with public and private duties is upheld and replicated in the conversation between her and Ermine, which is structured to mimic the women's sophisticated interplay between their public and private identities:

'I am not overwhelming you,' suddenly exclaimed Rachel, checking herself in mid-career about the mothers' meetings for soldier's wives. 'Far from it. I was inattentive - ?'
 'Oh no – (Yes, Una dear, very pretty) – but I found myself talking in the voice that always makes Alick shut his eyes.'
 'I should not think he often had to do so,' said Ermine, much amused by this gentle remedy – ('Mind, Keith, that is a nettle. It will sting -')
 'Less often than before,' said Rachel – '(Never mind the butterfly, Una) -',⁶³

As Rachel and Ermine discuss the plight of women who have married soldiers without the army's sanction – 'the most miserable creatures in the world' – their simultaneous attention to their children Una and Keith reveals women's ability to be both mothers and philanthropic activists.⁶⁴ The conversation also marks the resurgence of maternal philanthropy in *The Clever Woman of the Family*, as Rachel finally comes to appreciate the significance of maternalism to the female mission. Ermine and Rachel are sitting in the grounds of the Curtis family home and watching the opening of a new philanthropic institution in the community: a convalescent house ran by Ermine and her husband Colonel Keith and staffed by young working-class girls, who are trained up into nursing and service. That this institution is a maternal reworking of

⁶³ Yonge, *Clever Woman*, p. 542; p. 541.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 541.

Rachel's original dream to train working girls in something other than lace making is underlined by the fact that Rachel will be working in 'the nursery establishment' where she will practice 'Hints on the management of Infants'.⁶⁵ Unlike Rachel's F.U.E.E. which only brought disorder, the convalescent home and training centre is depicted at the centre of social cohesion and inter-class harmony, as the opening festivities evoke similar fantasies about Sunday school feast days found in Henry Thompson's biography of Hannah More and Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*:

leaving Ermine looking down a steep bank at the huge ring of performers, with linked hands, advancing and receding to the measure of a chanted verse round a figure in the centre, who made gesticulations, pursued and caught different individuals in the ring, and put them through a formula which provoked shouts of mirth. Ermine much enjoyed the sight; it was pretty to watch the *prononcé* dresses of the parish children, interspersed with the more graceful forms of the little gentry, and here and there a taller lady.⁶⁶

Where earlier Rachel scorned this Sunday school approach to social issues, now she is actively involved and calls the day 'delightful'.⁶⁷ With this new appreciation for local, small-scale charity, Rachel also reveals a changed understanding of herself – stating that 'I really do not think I ever was such a Clever Woman [...] I had a few intellectual tastes, and liked to think and read, which was supposed to be cleverness; and my wilfulness made me fancy myself superior in force of character, in a way I could never have imagined if I had lived more in the world.' With this statement Yonge seems to offer a rather dispiriting answer to the question asked by the title of her final chapter: 'Who is the clever

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 540.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p. 543.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 545.

woman?’ – an idea supported both by Conrade’s assessment that ‘Military discipline’ has made Rachel ‘conformable’, and Rachel and Alick’s own belief that the true ‘clever woman’ of the story is Ermine: ‘If we are to show Una how intellect and brilliant power can be no snares, but only blessings helping the spirits in infirmity and trouble, serving as a real engine for independence and usefulness, winning love and influence for good, genuine talents in the highest sense of the word, then commend me to such a Clever Woman of the family as Ermine Keith.’⁶⁸ Undeniably then, the veneration of the immobile Ermine, coupled with Conrade’s sense of Rachel’s conformity, does support a reading of *The Clever Woman of the Family* as engaged in the shrinking and curtailment of its heroine’s desires.

Nonetheless, Conrade’s assessment of Rachel as no longer a civilian also indicates her own elevated status in her community at the novel’s conclusion, as well as reiterates the significance of the military wife to Yonge’s conception of woman’s true mission. Moreover, while Rachel no longer regards herself as clever, it is frequently missed by critics that this label is now applied to her by others, as Ermine emphasises:

It has been a most happy day, and chief of all the pleasures has been the sight of Rachel just what I hoped, a thorough wife and mother, all the more so for her being awake to larger interests, and doing common things better for being the Clever Woman of the family.⁶⁹

The women’s mutual recognition of each other’s cleverness suggests a new communal aspect to Rachel and her philanthropy, and gestures to a different sort of space for the ambitious heroine to aspire to – one where the clever woman is

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 546-47; p. 543; p. 547.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 544-45. Daly, misses Ermine’s emphasis on Rachel’s cleverness, p. 57.

both ‘a thorough wife and mother’, but also remains ‘awake to larger interests’. Whereas previously, Rachel’s insistence on her own cleverness rather revealed her ineffective ignorance, her changed appreciation of cleverness in others and *vice versa*, in fact now illustrates Rachel’s newfound influence in the parochial sphere.

George Eliot

Middlemarch (1871-2)

The concerns of Charlotte Yonge’s *The Clever Woman of the Family* can be seen to resurface in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*. In her study of anti-feminist women novelists, Valerie Sanders draws on the connection between Rachel Curtis’ ‘objections against the pointlessness of a middle-class woman’s life’ in the early sections of Yonge’s novel and the ‘frustrations’ felt five years later by Eliot’s heroine Dorothea Brooke, and indeed, the two female characters are united in their desire for a mission that will both improve society on a grand scale and also offer them a greater role within the social sphere.⁷⁰ The similarities between Rachel and Dorothea can be traced further in their veneration of intellectual pursuits traditionally regarded as masculine, as well as in their attraction to the establishment of charitable institutions to achieve their visions for wider society. Another important connection between *The Clever Woman of the Family* and *Middlemarch* is moreover, the problematic status both texts possess within feminist literary criticism and feminist narratives of nineteenth-century history

⁷⁰ Sanders, *Eve’s Renegades*, p. 65.

and society – more of which shall be explored later in relation to George Eliot and the fate of Dorothea.

Of course, reading *Middlemarch* and Dorothea's story in light of debates surrounding female philanthropy and the place of the gentlewoman in Victorian society is nothing new. Numerous critics have examined Eliot's novel in relation to the Woman Question and ideas of vocation, and many share the view of Dorice Williams Elliott that Dorothea represents the 'failure of the philanthropic heroine'.⁷¹ Nevertheless, this assessment of Dorothea and female philanthropy is flawed. While many have discussed Dorothea as a philanthropist, the character's actual participation in different forms of benevolence throughout Eliot's narrative is often left unanalysed, in favour of considering Dorothea's relationships with the doctor Tertius Lydgate and the dilettantish would-be-MP Will Ladislaw. These two relationships are frequently used to decipher Dorothea's role in her community and the ultimate success or failure of her grand ambitions at the novel's conclusion. While this is not to deny the significance of Lydgate and - especially - Ladislaw to Dorothea's philanthropic dreams, a sharper focus on Dorothea and her benevolence in the novel (attempted or otherwise) draws out associations between *Middlemarch* and the philanthropic tradition of the nineteenth century, and in particular, the text's associations with the maternalist narrative seen in the writings of Hannah More and Elizabeth Gaskell.

⁷¹ Elliott, p. 189. For discussions of *Middlemarch* and female vocation see Alan Mintz, *George Eliot and the Novel of Vocation*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978), Dorothea Barrett, *Vocation and Desire: George Eliot's Heroines*, and Dorice Williams Elliott, *The Angel Out of the House: Philanthropy and Gender in Nineteenth-Century England*.

Thus although the famous Prelude and Finale with their invocations of St. Theresa and her epic life would seem to critique the small scale, localised philanthropy that Dorothea turns to at the end of the narrative, a reading of Dorothea that examines her attempts to patronise Lydgate's New Hospital, as well as her plans for new cottages for the poor and her dream to establish a colony in Yorkshire, in fact emphasises the problems such grand schemes pose for Eliot and *Middlemarch*, for the way in which they encourage distance and hierarchy within society. Indeed, while Eliot's depiction of St. Theresa in her Prelude is commonly interpreted as celebratory, her narrative voice rather appears to undercut the saint's work, as 'the reform of a religious order' is presented as an underwhelming and simplistic response to the aspirational, passionate and dramatic visions that precede it. Thinking back to Brontë's critical depiction of the nun's life in *Shirley*, the bureaucratic dryness of Theresa's 'reform' appears as unsuitable a cause for the young woman's ecstatic nature as the nun's life does for the passionate and loving Caroline Helstone:

Theresa's passionate, ideal nature demanded an epic life: what were many-volumed romances of chivalry and the social conquests of a brilliant girl to her? Her flame quickly burned up that light fuel; and, fed from within, soared after some illimitable satisfaction, some object which would never justify weariness, which would reconcile self-despair with the rapturous consciousness of life beyond self. She found her epos in the reform of a religious order.⁷²

As others have noted, both the setting of *Middlemarch* (1829-30) and the period of its creation (1871-2) limit the possibilities of any young woman aspiring to the epic visions of St. Theresa. Even as English society was slowly transformed by two Reform Bills in 1832 and 1867, women remained barred

⁷² Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 3.

from most aspects of public life. Yet as the main narrative of the novel demonstrates, this disparity between the visions of ‘these later born Theresas’ and the world they live in is not just attributable to ‘the meanness of opportunity’ that the women encounter, but the critical stance that Eliot maintains towards such grand dreams. *Middlemarch*, after all, is a novel concerned with shedding light ‘on this particular web’ of provincial England in the run up to the First Reform Bill of 1832.⁷³ While St. Theresa sought to reform a convent, Eliot’s text and her characters – including Dorothea – are concerned with the reform of *society* and are thus far more intimately woven into the lots of humankind than the epic female saint of the sixteenth century. In place of St. Theresa’s distant, hierarchical approach to reform, Eliot explores the importance of the ‘foundress of nothing’ and underlines the need for maternal, sympathetic connections between individuals if there is to be social prosperity and progress, which Eliot argued in her 1855 article on Mary Wollstonecraft and Margaret Fuller, can only be achieved ‘little by little’.⁷⁴ Traditional feminist criticism of Dorothea’s relationship with the St. Theresa of Eliot’s Prelude and Finale is thus overturned by attention to the representation of female philanthropy in the novel, which privileges the intimate, the parochial and the maternal over grand utopian visions. Unlike St. Theresa of Avila, George Eliot’s social vision is a parochial one.

The maternalism of *Middlemarch* is crucially different from that explored in *The Clever Woman of the Family* however, since in Eliot’s novel the good mother represents ‘the purest form’ of sympathy and thus brooks no guidance

⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 3; p. 132.

⁷⁴ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 4; George Eliot, ‘Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft’, *The Leader*, (13 October 1885), pp. 988-89, (p. 989).

from male advisers, and can be seen to more closely resemble the maternal figure depicted by Elizabeth Gaskell in *My Lady Ludlow*.⁷⁵ Eliot's veneration of motherhood and maternalism also contrasts with the ambivalent image of maternal philanthropy offered by *Shirley*. Like Brontë, Eliot was motherless by the time she started her career as a novelist, and she also had no children of her own. Yet different to Brontë, Eliot's relationship with her mother Christiana Evans was a strained one long before Christiana's death when Eliot was sixteen. And while Eliot may not have had any biological children of her own due to the circumstances of her relationship with George Henry Lewes, she did take an active part in the raising of Lewes' three sons. Moreover, both Eliot and Lewes, from the writing of *Silas Marner* onwards, referred to Eliot's novels 'as babies'.⁷⁶ As Kate Flint comments, 'The importance which George Eliot accorded maternity – or rather, the qualities which at best it calls out of the individual – may be judged by the parallels she quietly drew between it and her own sphere of productivity: writing', as the virtues of the writer for Eliot ' – patience, diligence, and the faithful execution of a sacred role – correspond to the traditional attributes of mothering'.⁷⁷ Thus while Eliot's biographer Kathryn Hughes notes 'the lack of warm, easy mother-child relationships in Eliot's novels', this recognition must be countered by the fact that in Eliot's fiction, it is the women who are *not* biological mothers who prove the most maternal: Dorothea in *Middlemarch*, Dinah Morris in *Adam Bede*, and Romola de'Bardi in

⁷⁵ Kate Flint, 'George Eliot and Gender', in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, ed. by George Levine, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 159-80, (p. 167).

⁷⁶ Kathryn Hughes, *George Eliot: The Last Victorian*, (London: Fourth Estate, 1998; repr. 1999), p. 340.

⁷⁷ Flint, 'George Eliot and Gender', p. 166.

Romola.⁷⁸ Indeed, one of the best mothers in Eliot's writing is a man – Silas Marner.⁷⁹ Crucially for the representation of maternal philanthropy in *Middlemarch*, 'parenting was not a strictly physiological role' for Eliot.⁸⁰ This wider conception of maternity both marks Eliot out from Brontë, who remains sceptical of any maternity beyond that of biological motherhood, and demonstrates the enduring significance of social maternalism to ideas about the role of the gentlewoman in her community. As with More, Gaskell and Yonge, the maternal woman is at the heart of the community in Eliot's writing.

The significance of the maternal narrative to *Middlemarch* as well as to the character of Dorothea Brooke therefore illustrates the connections between the writings of Hannah More and the works of George Eliot. An ardent evangelical in her early teens, Eliot's youthful letters to her friend and teacher Maria Lewis reveal her admiration for More and her works:

I have highly enjoyed Hannah More's letters; the contemplation of so blessed a character as hers is very salutary. 'That ye be not slothful but followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises,' is a valuable admonition.⁸¹

Seemingly following More's promotion of charitable works for women in their communities, Eliot is seen to establish a Clothing Club in 1840 and also engages in visiting the poor.⁸² The watchfulness of the evangelicals and self-scrutiny of More's Lucilla Stanley is also strongly present in the letters from this period of Eliot's life –

⁷⁸ Hughes, p. 22. See George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, (London: Blackwood and Sons, 1859); *Romola*, (London: Blackwood and Sons, 1863).

⁷⁹ George Eliot, *Silas Marner*, (London: Blackwood and Sons, 1861).

⁸⁰ Flint, 'George Eliot and Gender', p. 166.

⁸¹ Eliot, 'To Maria Lewis, 18th August 1838', in *The George Eliot Letters, Vol. I*, p. 7.

⁸² George Eliot, 'To Maria Lewis, 13th March 1840', in *The George Eliot Letters, Vol. I*, pp. 40-42, (pp. 40-41)

it is very certain we are generally too low in our aims, more anxious for safety than sanctity, for place than purity, forgetting that each involves the other, and that as Doddridge tells us to rest satisfied with any attainments in religion is a fearful proof that we are ignorant of the very first principles of it. O that we could live only for Eternity, that we could realise its nearness!⁸³

Even though Eliot later harshly characterised More as ‘that most disagreeable of all monsters, a blue-stocking – a monster that can only exist in a miserably false state of society, in which a woman with but a smattering of learning or philosophy is classed along with singing mice and card playing pigs’, this angry criticism smacks of defensiveness, since as Hughes notes, Eliot increasingly strove to separate her own intellectualism from the ‘drab image of a bluestocking’ as she entered adulthood.⁸⁴ This desire of Eliot’s for distinction from other women in the public realm resurfaces later with her vitriolic article in the *Westminster Review* ‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists’.⁸⁵ Yet even though Eliot later rejected the example of Hannah More’s ‘salutary’ character and indeed, lost her faith, the writer maintains strong sympathies with her Christian characters – and especially her ardent, religious heroines such as the Methodist preacher Dinah Morris in *Adam Bede* and of course, the intensely spiritual Dorothea Brooke ‘who knelt suddenly down on a brick floor by the side of a sick labourer and prayed fervidly as if she thought herself living in the time of the

⁸³ Eliot, ‘To Maria Lewis, 18th August 1838’, in *The George Eliot Letters*, Vol. I, p. 7.

⁸⁴ George Eliot, ‘To John Sibree Jnr., 11th February 1848’, in *The George Eliot Letters*, Vol. I, pp. 245-48, (p. 245); Hughes, p. 108

⁸⁵ George Eliot, ‘Silly Novels by Ladies Novelists’, *The Westminster Review*, (October 1856), pp. 442-61.

Apostles'.⁸⁶ These women, through their yearning for some greater spiritual good are placed at the centre of the novels' moral vision.

As with *My Lady Ludlow*, the significance of Hannah More to *Middlemarch* and the character of Dorothea can also be traced in the ideas of conservative reform that Eliot explores and upholds in her novel. Much has been said and debated over the politics of George Eliot, with Dorothea Barrett claiming the author as a radical feminist, and Nancy Henry labelling her a repressive conservator of the social order.⁸⁷ The idea of conservatism troubles our belief in a progressive, liberal narrative of the nineteenth century and 'conservative reformer' even more so, since it appears an oxymoron according to our own strictly defined divisions between conservative and liberal, right and left wing, and yet I would maintain, as George Levine does also, that Eliot was 'a conservative-reformer' in the truest sense, despite our tendencies now to read this 'conservative-reforming impulse in George Eliot [...] as rather exclusively conservative'.⁸⁸ As Kathryn Hughes describes in her biography of Eliot, the author saw social progress as something that of necessity must be gradual, if core values of society were to be preserved:

Despite the ruptures of the speedy present, Eliot believed that it was possible, indeed essential, that her readers stay within the parameters of the 'working-day world' – a phrase that would stand at the heart of her philosophy. She would not champion an oppositional culture, in which people put themselves outside the ordinary social and human networks which both nurtured and frustrated them. From Darwin she took not just the radical implications (we are all monkeys, there is probably no God), but the conservative ones too. Societies evolve over thousands of years;

⁸⁶ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 9.

⁸⁷ See Barrett, pp. 12-13, and Nancy Henry, 'George Eliot and Politics', in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, pp. 138-58, (p. 140).

⁸⁸ George Levine, 'Introduction: George Eliot and the art of realism', in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, pp. 1-19, (p. 2; p. 12).

change – if it is to work – must come gradually and from within. Opting out into political, religious or feminist Utopias will not do. Eliot's novels show people how they can deal with the pain of being a Victorian by remaining one. Hence all those low-key endings which have embarrassed feminists and radicals for over a century.⁸⁹

Like the writings of More, Gaskell and Yonge – and even Brontë – women are at the heart of the conservative reform project in Eliot's writings, and this is particularly the case in *Middlemarch*. Although the idea of women's 'unhistoricity' poses difficult questions for us today, it is the very 'unhistoric' nature of female acts – as Eliot terms it in her Finale – that makes women so suitable for the promotion of gradual change.⁹⁰ This is emphasised by *Middlemarch*'s return to the years immediately preceding 1832, where Dorothea's story and the questions over what she will do with her life are located as central to Eliot's depictions of a society on the edge of reform. Rather than being removed from the medical work of Lydgate, or the political struggles of her uncle and Will Ladislav, or even the land reform of Sir James Chettam, Dorothea's life is closely – and emotionally – connected with all these issues of change and progress. Eliot's return to the past is a return informed by the concerns of the present, and by returning to the moment just prior to the birth of the reforming Victorian age, Eliot underlines the borderline status of the gentlewoman in the times of both the First and Second Reform Acts. Although as already noted, Gleadle argues that this borderline aspect of women's lives made their citizenship 'fragile and contingent', in Eliot's novel, this dialectic between possibility and limitation, movement forward and back creates a space in *Middlemarch* for the resurgence of the maternal narrative and womanly

⁸⁹ Hughes, pp. 7-8.

⁹⁰ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 785.

sympathy, which will do much to influence the reform project of society.⁹¹ Like Yonge (albeit for different reasons), Eliot regards women's occupation of the borderlands of citizenship as positive, and can be seen to connect the success of her conservative reform project explicitly to women's borderline social status. While in her 1855 review of Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft, Eliot praises Fuller's 'calm plea for the removal of unjust laws and artificial restrictions, so that possibilities of [woman's] nature may have room for full development', she also argues, 'There is a perpetual action and reaction between individuals and institutions; we must try and mend both little by little – the only way in which human things can be mended.'⁹²

It is this sense of women's possibility and limitations that connects the 1832 reform setting of the narrative with the post-reform setting of its conception, where the second reform bill of 1867 both increased the franchise and simultaneously denied John Stuart Mill's amendment to the bill in favour of female suffrage. Indeed, both moments in history are seemingly linked by a shutting down of women's options for citizenship. The rejection of Mill's amendment mirrors the earlier explicit exclusion of women from the political process in 1832, as for the first time in history, the Reform Act stipulated that the English voter was a male one. Yet Dorothea's gradual, unhistoric role is privileged by Eliot over the radicalism symbolised in Mill's amendment, as the philanthropic heroine comes to appreciate her maternalist powers of sympathy over the typically masculine approach to benevolence of architectural plans and financial donations. While Dorothea's mission shrinks throughout the novel

⁹¹ Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens*, p. 2.

⁹² Eliot, 'Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft', p. 988; p. 989.

(images of shrinking recurring constantly in the text), this shrinking should not be viewed as a retreat by Eliot or her female philanthropist, but as rather, Dorothea's truer understanding of humankind's mission to each other, and her growing appreciation of society's sympathetic and local connections. It is in this vein that I regard the marriage between Dorothea and Will, and although I have chosen to focus on Dorothea's actual acts of charity as the best way of understanding Eliot's representation of female philanthropy, I would maintain that this marriage symbolises a marriage of feeling and of equals at Eliot's conclusion, and one that offers Dorothea a new arena of work, as she moves with Will, into an expanded parochial space of social and political change. This expansion of the parochial sphere can thus also be considered in light of the regimental space at the conclusion of *The Clever Woman of the Family*, and both Yonge's and Eliot's attempts to conceptualise the role of the gentlewoman in society along the lines of conservative reform.

Different to the St. Theresa of the Prelude but also to Rachel Curtis in *The Clever Woman of the Family*, Dorothea Brooke is depicted as desiring a greater role in the world but is simultaneously unable to both envisage and articulate what this role may be. Dorothea is introduced as seeking a 'lofty conception of the world which might frankly include the parish of Tipton and her own rule of conduct there' but also as struggling with an 'indefiniteness which hung in her mind, like a thick summer haze, over all her desire to make her life greatly effective', asking 'What could she do, what ought she to do?'⁹³ While Theresa has the structures of the Catholic Church in sixteenth-century Spain to guide her visions and Yonge's Rachel has the language of the Langham Place

⁹³ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 8; p. 26.

Group and the burgeoning social science movement to help articulate her mission, Dorothea is introduced to the reader as floundering in her desire to do good with little means to achieve her aims or even the ‘possibility of vocational expression’.⁹⁴ Yet if Dorothea is unsure about what she ought to do with her life, she is certain that her purpose will not be found in the sort of traditional female philanthropy represented by Hannah More in *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* – a fact underlined by her rejection of marriage to the paternalist landlord Sir James Chettam:

With some endowment of stupidity and conceit, she might have thought that a Christian young lady of fortune should find her ideal of life in village charities, patronage of the humbler clergy, the perusal of ‘Female Scriptural Characters,’ unfolding the private experience of Sara under the Old Dispensation, and Dorcas under the New, and the care of her soul over her embroidery in her own boudoir [...] From such contentment poor Dorothea was shut out.⁹⁵

Indeed, while we see Dorothea’s sister Celia engaging in such typically feminine behaviour as playing with the curate’s children and making toys for them, Dorothea aspires to a more traditionally masculine role in society and initially rejects the role of maternal philanthropist. Significantly, Dorothea’s early desires for a mission are represented via images of distance and power – longing ‘for the time when she would be of age and have some command of money for generous schemes’, and for a ‘lofty conception of the world’, as well establishing and planning an infant school in the village and cottages for the poor, ‘a kind of work which she delighted in’.⁹⁶ Dorothea’s approach to society

⁹⁴ Mintz, p. 103.

⁹⁵ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 26.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 8; p. 11.

and philanthropy is thus a hierarchical one, as she plans a new vision of the world financed by inherited (male) wealth but does not actively seek to involve herself in it. In this respect, Dorothea is seen to resemble the ambitious new doctor Tertius Lydgate, who also believes in his ability to reform society whilst remaining removed from it, and like Dorothea, images of height and highness are associated with him throughout the text, as demonstrated by Lydgate and Dorothea's conversation towards the end of the novel, which emphasises the fallacy of such a notion:

‘And that all this should have come to you who had meant to lead a higher life than the common, and to find out better ways’ [...]

‘I had some ambition. I meant everything to be different with me. I thought I had more strength and mastery.’⁹⁷

In the world of *Middlemarch* and its vision of society as a web, Dorothea's sense of her place in the community as distant and hierarchical must be challenged and defeated. This drawing in of the heroine into a more sympathetic, emotional connection with the lives of those around her can only be achieved however, once Dorothea understands the dangers of her veneration of masculine knowledge and power. In her search for a mission Dorothea looks for a male teacher to guide her to the ‘truth’ and initially, she believes she has found this teacher in Edward Casaubon and his scholarly work the unpublished *Key to All Mythologies*, which seeks to connect all world religions:

It had now entered Dorothea's mind that Mr. Casaubon might wish to make her his wife, and the idea that he would do so touched her with a sort of reverential gratitude. How good of him – nay, it would be almost as if a winged messenger had suddenly stood beside her path and held out his hand towards her! [...]

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 719.

‘I should learn everything then,’ she said to herself still walking quickly along the bridle road through the wood. ‘It would be my duty to study that I might help him the better in his great work. There would be nothing trivial about our lives. Everyday things with us would mean the greatest things. It would be like marrying Pascal. I should learn to see truth by the same light as great men have seen it by. And then I should know what to do, when I got older: I should see how it was possible to lead a grand life here – now – in England. I don’t feel sure about doing good in any way now: everything seems like going on a mission to a people whose language I don’t know; - unless it were building good cottages – there can be no doubt about that.’⁹⁸

Dorothea’s belief in Casaubon’s ability to ‘see truth’ is partly based on his classical education, which, like the knowledge of ‘that never-explained science’ political economy, she has been unable to access as a woman.⁹⁹ In marrying Casaubon, Dorothea hopes to be taught Latin and Greek in order to help him with his work, but also because she believes that these ‘provinces of masculine knowledge’ are a ‘standing-ground from which all truth could be seen more truly’. Eliot’s ironic and slightly condescending depiction of Dorothea’s desire for learning – ‘she wished, poor child, to be wise herself’ – both emphasises the criticism directed towards the classics in *Middlemarch* as opposed to the contemporary studies of Tertius Lydgate and even Will Ladislav, but also reflects this uneasy relationship between Eliot and other rival female intellectuals, as her changing attitude towards More has already demonstrated.¹⁰⁰

Dorothea’s failure to learn Greek thus maintains a distinction between author and character that can be seen to support Wilhelm’s analysis of Dorothea as an ‘aborted George Eliot’ but more importantly, Dorothea’s failure indicates

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 26-27.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 17.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p. 59.

the inability of both her husband and his scholarship to help her see ‘all truth more truly’.¹⁰¹ As Felicia Bonaparte notes in her introduction to the Oxford Classics edition of *Middlemarch*, it is not for nothing that Casaubon is ‘habitually depicted in the imagery of death’, as he and his dead languages have little to offer the world that Dorothea seeks to change for the better – indeed, it is Casaubon’s failure to learn the living language of German that has rendered his great work obsolete.¹⁰² Nonetheless, it would be wrong to draw too strong a distinction between Dorothea and Casaubon in the early days of their courtship and marriage as between the living and the dead, since Dorothea and her plans are almost as removed from the social world as Casaubon’s research pamphlets. Although Dorothea responds angrily to Celia’s description of her plans as her ‘favourite *fad*’, in some ways the plans for new housing *are* fads of Dorothea’s, since Eliot connects them to the trivial pursuits that Celia occupies herself with whilst her sister draws cottages, but also crucially, compares them with the studies of Casaubon: ‘On one – only one – of her favourite themes she was disappointed. Mr. Casaubon apparently did not care about building cottages, and diverted the talk to the extremely narrow accommodation which was to be had in the dwellings of the ancient Egyptians’.¹⁰³ Casaubon’s lack of interest in the building of cottages has often been taken as another example of his lack of appreciation of Dorothea and her work, but in fact the scholar’s connection of

¹⁰¹ Cherry Wilhelm, ‘Conservative Reform in *Middlemarch*’, in *Theoria* 53 (1979), 47-57; repr. in *Middlemarch: an authoritative text, backgrounds, criticism*, George Eliot, ed. by Bert G. Hornback, (New York: Norton, 2000), pp. 597-605, (p. 605).

¹⁰² Felicia Bonaparte, ‘Introduction’, in *Middlemarch*, George Eliot, (Oxford: OUP, 1997), pp. vii-xxxviii, (p. xiii).

¹⁰³ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 34; p. 31.

Dorothea's housing plans with those of Ancient Egypt reveals the lack of reality both documents have when contrasted with actual lived experience.¹⁰⁴

Rather than learn why 'men who knew the classics appeared to conciliate indifference to the cottages with zeal for glory' or even prove the importance of her plans to her husband, Dorothea must come to understand the power of her sympathetic, ardent, feminine nature to effect social change from within, which is symbolised by her 'beautiful' hands – not thin or small but 'powerful, feminine, *maternal* hands' (emphasis added).¹⁰⁵ In the world of George Eliot's novels it is crucial that Dorothea's hands – the part of her that can create literal, physical connections with the outside world – are described as maternal. Dorothea's hands reinforce the argument that although the 'figure of the mother is a key one in George Eliot's writing', more often than not it is social rather than biological motherhood that is praised, since it is '*maternal feeling*' that encompasses Eliot's 'most cherished social values – sympathetic involvement, recognition of the demands of alterity, patient adherence to duty' (emphasis added). As Flint maintains, motherhood 'appears as the purest form of George Eliot's often-commended virtue of sympathy. But importantly, George Eliot also freely acknowledges not just that maternal propensities may find other outlets, but that not all biological mothers feel this commitment to their offspring.'¹⁰⁶ Significantly, another important female character in *Middlemarch* – Mary Garth – is also described as maternal by Eliot, as her love for the irresponsible Fred Vincy is explored in terms of motherly compassion, 'something like what a mother feels at the imagined sobs or cries of her naughty truant child, which may

¹⁰⁴ See Bonaparte, p. xiii.

¹⁰⁵ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 59; p. 36.

¹⁰⁶ Flint, 'George Eliot and Gender', p. 165; p. 168; p. 167.

lose itself and get harm'.¹⁰⁷ It is these maternal figures – as with the nurturing Dinah Morris in *Adam Bede* and not with the bad mother Hetty Sorrel – that Eliot looks to as the providers of her conservative reforming vision, as both the generators of new life and the carers of those already living.

Predictably, marriage to Casaubon does little to alter Dorothea's relationship with the world around her. Even the status and power brought by being a married woman – the money that Dorothea so yearned for to implement 'generous schemes' – is unavailing, since Dorothea is prevented by her husband from carrying out her charitable intentions towards her inheritance. As Casaubon rejects Dorothea's desire to portion out his family property more fairly between herself and Will Ladislaw, Casaubon's will – quite literally – is shown to be stronger than Dorothea's:

'Dorothea, my love, this is not the first occasion, but it were well that it should be the last, on which you have assumed a judgment on subjects beyond your scope. [...] Suffice it, that you are not here qualified to discriminate.'

[...]

Hearing him breathe quickly after he had spoken, she sat listening, frightened, wretched – with a dumb inward cry for help to bear this nightmare of a life in which every energy was arrested by dread. But nothing else happened, except that they both remained a long while sleepless, without speaking again.¹⁰⁸

Although Dorothea has 'some money' that she would like to use for a 'grand purpose', her philanthropic desires are both encouraged and limited by the men around her, thus highlighting her borderline status in society.¹⁰⁹ It is

¹⁰⁷ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 239.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, p. 352.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, p. 413.

significant that it is in this context of money and benevolence that Eliot represents Dorothea's position in the fringes of social power is represented as negative. Whilst women's borderline citizenship is depicted as particularly suited to Eliot's narratives of social maternalism and conservative reform, it is incompatible with a masculine model of charity that assumes total control over the household finances, as well as over the intended recipient of the benevolence. This is demonstrated further by Dorothea's relationship with Lydgate's New Hospital. After Dorothea's disastrous attempt to guide Casaubon to make a provision for Ladislav at the expense of her own inheritance, a different charitable avenue opens for Dorothea in the form of the New Hospital, which Lydgate has established in Middlemarch to treat and research fever. Whilst discussing the decreasing health of Casaubon with Lydgate, the doctor requests a donation from Dorothea in support of his project, since he remembers her 'asking [...] some questions about the way in which the health of the poor was affected by their miserable houses'.¹¹⁰ Dorothea's enthusiastic response to this appeal is reminiscent of her attitude before her marriage and seems to support her continued belief in the power of distant, hierarchical charity to effect social change:

'I am glad you have told me this, Mr. Lydgate,' said Dorothea, cordially. 'I feel sure I can help a little. I have some money, and don't know what to do with it – that is often an uncomfortable thought to me. I am sure I can spare two hundred a-year for a grand purpose like this. How happy you must be, to know things that you feel sure will do great good! I wish I could awake with the knowledge every morning. There seems to be so much trouble taken that one can hardly see the good of!'¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 412.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 413.

Dorothea's confidence in being able to help the New Hospital is subject to her husband's permission, thus underlining the continual tension between possibility and limitation found in this approach to philanthropy. As Dorice Williams Elliott also recognises, 'whether Dorothea is allowed to act on her desires as she wishes always depends on the permission and support of her male relatives'.¹¹² While Casaubon acquiesces to Dorothea's plan this time, since he 'did not care himself about spending money, and was not reluctant to give it', his disinterest coupled with his final authority over the matter emphasises the constraints imposed on Eliot's philanthropic heroine when she seeks to 'do great good' via paternalistic methods of charity, and challenges Wilhelm's reading of Dorothea's benevolence as effective and moral.¹¹³ Rather bizarrely, Wilhelm regards Dorothea's financial philanthropy in the same favourable light as the benevolence of the Reverend Farebrother's aunt Henrietta Noble, whose personal poverty does not prohibit her from providing for her poorer neighbours. Unlike the wealthy Dorothea who dreams of donating to a 'generous scheme', Henrietta secretly divides her food between herself and 'the children of her poor friends', and the 'fostering and petting' of 'all needy creatures' gives the elderly woman a real, 'spontaneous [...] delight'. It is this maternally minded, intimate version of communal relations that *Middlemarch* holds up as a lesson in charity for its heroine – underlined by the narrator's approving assessment of this minor female character: 'One must be poor to know the luxury of giving!'¹¹⁴

Casaubon's death marks the beginning of the shift in Dorothea's vision of her place in society and how best to achieve the social good, as her faith in

¹¹² Elliott, p. 196.

¹¹³ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 413; p. 414; Wilhelm, p. 601.

¹¹⁴ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 158.

masculine power and learning is quickly disillusioned by her husband's last wishes. Significantly for a novel concerned so much with wills and money, Dorothea's rejection of her old ideas of duty towards her husband's dreams of scholarship is brought about by the codicil in Casaubon's will, which disinherits Dorothea upon marriage to Will Ladislaw. Dorothea learns of this codicil from Celia, who is now a mother, and the maternal backdrop of 'baby' and his mother's fussing, to this sudden revelation both starkly contrasts with the 'cold grasp' of the dead patriarch on Dorothea, and gestures the way forward for the female philanthropist into the world of the living and the new, and into a community shaped by maternal relationships: 'Her world was in a state of convulsive change; the only thing she could say distinctly to herself was, that she must wait and think anew.'¹¹⁵ Whereas previously, Dorothea had believed in Casaubon's ability to unveil a 'lofty conception of the world' to her, she now understands that his 'thoughts had been lower than she had believed'.¹¹⁶ Freed from the 'painful subjection' of her marriage and the cramped spaces of action she found as the *wife* of Casaubon, as his *widow* Dorothea now appears to be invested with new, greater powers - with her judgment 'made active' and supported by the wealth and status of her former husband's property.¹¹⁷ Celia is quick to acknowledge the possibilities of Dorothea's new social position for her philanthropic 'notions', since a 'husband would not let you have your plans' but as a widow – like Lady Ludlow - Dorothea answers to no one.¹¹⁸ Indeed, one of the first things Dorothea does after learning about her husband and his will is

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 461.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8; p. 464.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 464.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 693.

turn her thoughts to the duties of her new property and decide on the now vacant living of Lowick's parish, which she gives to Mr. Farebrother instead of her uncle's preferred candidate of Mr. Tyke. In choosing Farebrother, Dorothea instantly transforms the life of the vicar and his family for the better, as Farebrother is able to give up his gambling, and thus Dorothea is seen to possess real power to bring good into the lives of those around her.

However, even as a widow Dorothea's power remains one that fluctuates between possibility and limitation. The female philanthropist's continued position on the borders of the grand schemes she seeks to implement across society even after her husband's death is in keeping with Gleadle's argument that nineteenth-century 'women might be conceptualised (and feel) integral' to the social and political process 'at one moment – but this could quickly evaporate'.¹¹⁹ It also implies that Dorothea will have to find a new way of doing good – a way that utilises her marginal social position rather than works against it. After Casaubon's death Dorothea is still seen to be ineffective. Due to her husband's will, Dorothea feels unable to divide his property as she would choose between herself and Ladislav – 'was it not impossible for her to do that act of justice?' – and her choice of Farebrother is merely guided by Lydgate, as opposed to her uncle, and does not originate solely with her. Dorothea's social power and her plans to do good thus continue to be supervised by her 'masculine advisers' and as Dorice Williams Elliott also argues, she seems to have 'very little' control over her own money even as a widow.¹²⁰ Similarly, her acceptance of Lydgate's opinion is seen to be motivated by the fact that Dorothea herself has

¹¹⁹ Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens*, p. 2.

¹²⁰ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 464; p. 715; Elliott, p. 196.

little knowledge of the community that she possesses so much authority in, for as the doctor recognises, ‘You don’t, of course, see many Middlemarch people’.¹²¹ This lack of knowledge of others is mirrored in Dorothea’s equal lack of self-knowledge – Lydgate forms the ‘true conclusion’ that the Casaubon marriage has caused the female philanthropist to suffer ‘from the strain and conflict of self-repression’, and such self-repression appears to endure as Dorothea fails to explore and acknowledge the meaning of her feelings for Ladislaw even after the death of her husband: ‘She did not know then that it was Love who had come to her briefly, as in a dream before awaking, with the hues of morning on his wings’.¹²² The failure to recognise feeling – both communal and individual – and thus the ties that bind society together, make Dorothea an ineffectual philanthropist in the world of *Middlemarch*, as Eliot’s heroine remains seemingly at a distance from the web of the parochial sphere.

This idea of distance is underlined by Dorothea’s subsequent plan to ‘take a great deal of land, and drain it, and make it a little colony, where everybody should work, and all the work should be done well. I should know every one of the people and be their friend’, which in its vision also seems to uphold Celia’s belief that ‘it is very nice for Dodo to be a widow [...] she can have as many notions of her own as she likes.’¹²³ While Dorothea’s desire to befriend the people of her ‘little colony’ suggests a greater understanding on her part of the need for positive social bonds in the pursuit of reform, her plan to establish her own version of utopia with herself at the head undercuts *Middlemarch*’s insistence on sympathetic connection, as it maintains Dorothea’s hierarchical

¹²¹ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 466.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 462; p. 515.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 517; p. 504.

approach to society and philanthropy. Indeed, as Bert G. Hornback comments in his essay on Eliot's moral imagination, Dorothea's plan for a colony 'sounds not just Utopian, but outrageously Faustian – even to her plan to “drain” the land. She expects “to know every one of the people and be their friend” – and to play queen of the pet-shop, or proprietor of a miniature English Eden.'¹²⁴ Alan Mintz and Dorice Williams Elliott connect Dorothea's colony with the schemes of Robert Owen in New Harmony, Indiana, which were contemporary to the period of *Middlemarch*, but neither critic draws out the wider colonial context of Dorothea's plan, which interacts both with ideas of empire and missionary philanthropy.¹²⁵ With this context in mind, Dorothea's proposed community substantiates Patrick Brantlinger's argument that the 'early and mid-Victorians were far from indifferent to “the colonies.” On the contrary, colonial politics influenced all domestic issues and reform movements throughout the century', with the 'reform optimism [...] dissected so thoroughly in *Middlemarch*' easily spilling 'over into numerous civilising projects and stories about converting the savages'.¹²⁶

Brantlinger's work, whilst not specifically concerned with *Middlemarch*, enables the connection of Dorothea's utopian dreams with the representation of the colonies and the role of English women within them in *The Clever Woman of the Family*. Like Fanny Temple, the vice-queen of her regiment when stationed in India, Dorothea is held by others to possess semi-regal status – for Chettam it 'is a pity [Dorothea] was not a queen' and later, the Lydgates' servant Martha

¹²⁴ Bert G. Hornback, 'The Moral Imagination of George Eliot', *Papers on Language and Literature* 8, (South Illinois University at Edwardsville: 1972); repr. and revised in *Middlemarch: an authoritative text, backgrounds, criticisms*, pp. 606-18, (p. 608).

¹²⁵ Mintz, pp. 108-109; Elliott, p. 195.

¹²⁶ Brantlinger, p. 4; p. 30

regards Dorothea as a 'queenly young widow'.¹²⁷ But unlike Yonge's veneration of the colonial project, which is notable for its parochial intimacy, Dorothea's desire for her own miniature civilisation is problematic for Eliot, since it once again indicates her heroine's desire for distance and authority through position, rather than through understanding and feeling. Furthermore, the plan emphasises Dorothea's enduring distance from her own emotions, since she provides it as an alternative solution to remarrying, thereby refusing the possibility of marriage to the man she continues to secretly love. Mintz regards this distance in Dorothea's view of both herself and her world as evidence of her 'paternalistic' vision of society and charity and his analysis reinforces my argument that the plot of *Middlemarch* is concerned with the heroine's transition from a paternal to a maternal relationship with society:

Dorothea languishes for the good, but she will have it only on certain terms: as the mother superior of a poor order, as the patroness of an agricultural colony, as the legislator of a petty kingdom. The paternalism in Dorothea is revealed in the distance she envisions between benefactor and recipient. The area in which the good can be done it not where Dorothea finds herself at the moment, within the circle of gentry and professional men of Middlemarch, but rather somewhere far away: down among the poor or removed to a colony in the future – a preserve of goodness. Acting across a distance, Dorothea need never be touched by her generosity; she can attain salvation without giving up anything that it really hurts to give up.¹²⁸

Even as Dorothea experiments with the idea of her colony however, the narrative and her male advisers shut down this option for her. Although Dorothea does visit Yorkshire to examine a potential site for her village of 'industry', 'Sir James and [her] uncle [...convince Dorothea] that the risk would be too great.'¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 504; p. 728.

¹²⁸ Mintz, p. 109.

¹²⁹ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 720.

Burdened with a sense of having ‘too much’, Dorothea’s first response upon learning of Lydgate’s troubles after the death of John Raffles is to renew her offer of a donation to the New Hospital if that will ensure his stay at Middlemarch:

‘It would be quite worth my while,’ said Dorothea simply. ‘Only think. I am very uncomfortable with my money, because they tell me I have too little for any grand scheme of the sort I like best, and yet I have too much. I don’t know what to do. I have seven hundred a –year of my own fortune, and nineteen hundred a-year that Mr. Casaubon left me, and between three and four thousand of ready money in the bank. I wished to raise money and pay it off gradually out of my income which I don’t want, to buy land with and found a village which should be a school of industry; but Sir James and my uncle have convinced me that the risk would be too great. So you see that what I should most rejoice at would be to have something good to do with my money: I should like it to make other people’s lives better to them. It makes me very uneasy – coming all to me who don’t want it.’¹³⁰

Yet as Lydgate confides to Dorothea, such financial assistance cannot save himself or his marriage, and thus a more personal form of charity must be employed by Dorothea if she is to help her friend. Dorothea’s offer to visit Rosamond and give Mrs. Lydgate her sympathy indicates a change in Dorothea’s charity, although it is clear that Dorothea still regards herself in the position of benefactor – giving Rosamond ‘cheer’ and still insisting on donating to the New Hospital and Lydgate’s research: ‘Think how much money I have; it would be like taking a burthen from me if you took some of it every year till you got free from this fettering want of income.’¹³¹ It is this sense of Dorothea’s benevolence that Lydgate takes away from their interview and which encourages him to think of her as both apart and above the rest of humanity with ‘a heart large enough for

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 720.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 721-22.

the Virgin Mary' wanting 'nothing for herself but a chair to sit in from which she can look down with those clear eyes at the poor mortals who pray to her.'¹³²

Nonetheless, even as Dorothea writes a cheque of a thousand pounds for the doctor, Lydgate maintains to himself that 'her love might help a man more than her money', thereby continuing to undermine Dorothea's exalted position as both heiress and saint in the closing stages of the narrative.¹³³

Of course, Dorothea's first visit to Rosamond is curtailed by her seeming discovery of an adulterous relationship between Rosamond and Ladislav, and thus for the first time we see Eliot's heroine – in Alan Mintz's words – 'touched by her generosity', as real emotional demands are made on her by her own charity.¹³⁴ It is significant to the depiction of philanthropy in *Middlemarch* that Dorothea initially seeks to repress the emotional impact of her meeting with Rosamond and Ladislav by turning to her more distanced, paternal form of charity, as she leaves the Lydgate home and talks to the local schoolmaster and mistress about her gift of a new bell for the schoolhouse and subsequently maintains her pose of the paternal landowner in a conversation with 'old Master Bunny' about gardening and 'crops that would make the most return on a perch of ground.' Both instances in 'their small details and repetitions' enable Dorothea to get 'up a dramatic sense that her life was very busy', but her paternalist methods instead gesture only to the void behind her philanthropy.¹³⁵ It is Henrietta Noble with her small acts of charity and emotional attachment to Ladislav that forces Dorothea to confront her deeply repressed emotions. This

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 723.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 724.

¹³⁴ Mintz, p. 109.

¹³⁵ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 737.

confrontation will enable her to carry out a genuine act of charity for one in need. Crucially, Dorothea's realisation of her love for Will is described in intensely maternal terms, as Eliot references the judgment of Solomon in representing her heroine's grief:

There were two images – two living forms that tore her heart in two, as if it had been the heart of a mother who seems to see her child divided by the sword, and presses one bleeding half to her breast while her gaze goes forth in agony towards the half which is carried away by the lying woman that has never known the mother's pang.¹³⁶

Previous to this moment Dorothea had lain on the floor and sobbed like 'a despairing child' but she now finds a maternal strength from within her feelings of pain, and in the famous window scene, it is maternal images of care and nurturance in the form of 'a woman carrying her baby' and 'a shepherd with his dog' that finally draw her into 'that involuntary, palpitating life' and force her to abandon her role hitherto 'as a mere spectator' on society.¹³⁷ Abandoning her identity as a widow in deepest mourning, Dorothea instead goes out to see Rosamond woman to woman, and, in the language of the female philanthropists who sought to redeem their 'fallen' sisters, she seeks to 'see and save Rosamond'.¹³⁸

Dorothea's closer, more maternal connection with the world around her is then underlined by her scene with Rosamond, which sees the female philanthropist carrying out a very different kind of charity than she had ever envisioned for herself. While Dorothea has always been generous with her time and money – or at least, desires to be so – with Rosamond she experiences her

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 739.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 741.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 742.

first real sacrifice, and learns what it means to be truly generous: ‘She tried to master herself with the thought that this might be a turning-point in three lives – not in her own; no, there the irrevocable had happened, but – in those three lives which were touching hers with the solemn neighbourhood of danger and distress.’¹³⁹ The scene is dominated by images of closeness and touch, as the two women come together and provide mutual relief but crucially, the moments of reconciliation and revelation are instigated by Dorothea’s hands – her maternal hands, which clasp the small, ‘fragile’ ones of Rosamond with ‘gentle motherliness’, and time and time again the narrator returns to this image of Dorothea’s larger hands holding those of childlike Rosamond and providing comfort.¹⁴⁰ Nonetheless, even after the revelations of this visit, it seems that Dorothea desires to retreat back into a more distanced connection with society, as she keeps her love for Will at bay by immersing herself in more empty philanthropic activities:

What was there to be done in the village? Oh dear! nothing. Everybody was well and had flannel; nobody’s pig had died; and it was Saturday morning, when there was a general scrubbing of floors and doorstones, and when it was useless to go into the school. But there were various subjects Dorothea was trying to get clear upon, and she resolved to throw herself energetically into the gravest of all. She sat down in the library before her particular little heap of books on political economy and kindred matters, out of which she was trying to get light as to the best way of spending money so as not to injure one’s neighbours, or – what comes to the same thing – so as to do them the most good. Here was a weighty subject which, if she could but lay hold of it, would certainly keep her mind steady.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 747.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 745.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 756.

Dorothea's return to political economy – the subject Brooke had in her days of Casaubon's courtship 'twitted' her with her ignorance of – emphasises the female philanthropist's fraught relationship with masculine knowledge and power in *Middlemarch*, and would apparently indicate Dorothea's continued faith in social theory to help her do the most good for her neighbours.¹⁴² The narrator's ironic stance towards Dorothea's efforts however – 'Here was a weighty subject, which if she could but lay hold of it, would certainly keep her mind steady' – coupled with her own inability to focus her attention on her reading – 'she found herself reading sentences twice over with an intense consciousness of many things, but not of any one thing contained in the text' – reveals instead the now trivial place male knowledge holds in Dorothea's world view and the extent of her transformation by the close of the novel.¹⁴³ This trivial position echoes the implied criticism of masculine economics and charity found in *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*, but also the open rejection of political economy voiced by Elizabeth Gaskell in her Preface to *Mary Barton* in 1848, as Gaskell's assertion of ignorance reveals the irrelevancy of theory to the world of human relations and feeling: 'I know nothing of Political Economy, or the theories of trade. I have tried to write truthfully; and if my accounts agree or clash with any system, the agreement or disagreement is unintentional.'¹⁴⁴

Eliot's reference to her heroine's failed grappling with her 'little heap of books' is also more significant for later in the scene however, after Dorothea and Will have confessed their love for each other. Rejecting 'all the obstructions

¹⁴² *Ibid*, p. 17.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 756.

¹⁴⁴ Elizabeth Gaskell, 'Preface', in *Mary Barton*, (London: Chapman and Hall, 1848; repr. London: Penguin, 1985), pp. 37-38, (p. 38).

which had kept her silent', Dorothea announces 'I cannot bear it – my heart will break [...] I don't mind about poverty – I hate my wealth [...] We could live quite well on my own fortune – it is too much – seven hundred a-year – I want so little – no new clothes – and I will learn what everything costs.'¹⁴⁵ Although Dorothea's refrain of hating her wealth is nothing new, as it always prefaces her attempts at benevolence, what *is* new is her actual rejection of her inheritance from Casaubon, which will be effected as soon as she and Will marry. Rather than simply dreaming of giving away her money, Dorothea has actually carried it out and in doing so, she signals her final denial of the masculine knowledge and power that she so long venerated. By pledging to 'learn what everything costs', Dorothea privileges a different kind of social knowledge that can only be achieved through living and struggling within society (as Lydgate discovers too late), and she closes her story by taking her place amongst her neighbours and scandalising the Chettams by living in that most parochial of spaces - a street.

This sense of Dorothea's newfound connectedness to the world via her marriage to Will is substantiated with the Finale, which has proven so problematic for many feminist critics. The narrator's return to Dorothea's story is marked by an insistence on Dorothea's removal from the pedestal that she occupied for much of the text:

Dorothea herself had no dreams of being praised above other women, feeling that there was always something better which she might have done, if she had only been better and known better. Still, she never repented that she had given up position and fortune to marry Will Ladislaw, and he would have held it the greatest shame as well as sorrow to him if she had repented. They were bound to each other by a love stronger than any impulses which could have marred it. No life would have been possible to Dorothea which was not filled with emotion, and

¹⁴⁵ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 762.

she had now a life filled also with beneficent activity which she had not the doubtful pains of discovering and marking out for herself. Will became an ardent public man, working well in those times when reforms were begun with a young hopefulness of immediate good which has been much checked in our days, and getting at last returned to Parliament by a constituency who paid his expenses. Dorothea could have liked nothing better, since wrongs existed, than that her husband should be in the thick of a struggle against them, and that she should give him wifely help.¹⁴⁶

Dorothea's marriage to Will thus symbolises the fulfilment of her philanthropic visions. Whereas before Dorothea 'never could do anything that [she] liked', never having 'carried out any plan yet', as the partner of Will in the age of reform, she now has 'a life filled also with a beneficent activity which she had not the doubtful pains of discovering and marking out for herself'.¹⁴⁷ This reading of the Ladislaw partnership thus challenges Nancy Henry's view of women and politics in *Middlemarch*, as Henry insists on a distinction between domestic and political space and sees Dorothea's marriage to Will as a 'retreat' from her earlier 'strong political' position.¹⁴⁸ Unlike her marriage to Casaubon, the marital sphere that Dorothea occupies as the wife of a reforming MP is infused with domestic, political and national concerns, and as Kathryn Gleadle, and also Muireann O'Cinneide have shown, wives of politicians throughout the nineteenth century used their homes as 'key sites of political activity', led by their roles as 'hostesses, negotiators, communicators, dispensers of patronage, and canvassers'.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 782-83.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 770; p. 782.

¹⁴⁸ Henry, p. 140.

¹⁴⁹ O'Cinneide, p. 154; see also Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens*, p. 161.

Eliot appears to recognise the criticism of her readers when the narrator remarks,

Many who knew her, thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in certain circles as a wife and mother. But no one stated exactly what else that was in her power she ought rather to have done – not even Sir James Chettam, who went no further than the negative prescription that she ought not to have married Will Ladislaw.

But to demand Dorothea's distinction is to misunderstand the nature of real charity and influence in the parochial world of *Middlemarch*, where to be known 'as a wife and mother' and to be 'absorbed into the life of another' is to exercise genuine feminine, maternal strength.¹⁵⁰ For Eliot, this strength must be 'unhistoric' and 'incalculably diffusive' in a world that can no longer be reformed through the dramatic acts of St Theresa or Antigone, but rather through the work of those whose 'inward being' is 'determined by what lies outside of it' and is focused on 'the growing good of the world'.¹⁵¹

Charlotte Yonge's and George Eliot's commitment to the parochial spaces of their novels has seen them criticised by their readers for not propelling their ambitious heroines into the public sphere. And indeed, while Rachel Curtis and Dorothea Brooke dream of inspiring vast social change, it is true that these dreams are not realised. It seems unfair to describe Yonge's rejection of the public sphere as anti-feminist however, since the author strives to keep both her male *and* female characters within their local communities. Eliot's insistence on the ultimately unhistoric, parochial nature of Dorothea's mission also accords with her vision of organic gradual change. When one considers the ludicrous

¹⁵⁰ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 783.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 785.

attempts of Mr. Brooke to stand for a reformed parliament, Dorothea's unobtrusive work for Ladislaw's struggle against social wrongs is given greater meaning – not less. The expanded vision of the parochial sphere offered at the conclusions of *The Clever Woman of the Family* and *Middlemarch* therefore demonstrate the adaptability of the narrative of conservative reform for the female writer, as well as appear to indicate the endurance of the empowering relationship between the gentlewoman and her local community into the closing stages of the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, the influence maintained by the Langham Place Group over Yonge's heroine implies new tensions within the parochial spaces of women's writing, as the local came into increasing contact with the public and political spaces of London. These tensions will be explored by the following chapter, which examines the conflicting desires of Mrs. Humphry Ward's heroine Marcella Boyce – like Dorothea Ladislaw – another politician's wife.

Chapter Four

**‘Citizenship lies in the participation of each individual in effort for the good
of the community’:**

Mrs. Humphry Ward’s Empowered Parochial Philanthropy

1888 saw the publication of the latest biography of Hannah More. Entitled simply *Hannah More*, it was written by the author Charlotte Yonge for the biography series *Eminent Women*, which at the time of *Hannah More*’s publication already contained seventeen other titles that examined the lives of women from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While interest in the female philanthropist had waned somewhat over the hundred years since her establishment of Sunday schools in the Mendips during the 1790s and the publication of *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* in 1808, biographies of More continued to be produced throughout the nineteenth century with texts by Helen C. Knight and Anna Buckland appearing in 1851 and 1882 respectively.¹ Moreover, as Alison Booth’s study of Victorian collective biography has demonstrated, Hannah More maintained a steady presence in that phenomenon of nineteenth-century publishing, the biographical annual, and in fact, was the second most popular female philanthropist to be included in such works as *Celebrated Women* and *Notable Women* throughout the Victorian period.²

Yet if Yonge’s biography of Hannah More appears only as a continuation of the Victorians’ veneration of the female philanthropist and female philanthropy in general, it is notably different from Henry Thompson’s *Life of*

¹ Helen Cross Knight, *A New Memoir of Hannah More; or, Life in Hall and Cottage*, (New York: M. W. Dodd, 1851). Buckland, *Hannah More*.

² Booth, p. 394.

Hannah More in its celebration of More's status as a single woman, and its connection of More to the movement for female education. This contrast is evident in the two biographies' conclusions, as Thompson's praising of More for her 'pure and heavenly CHARITY, the love of God because He first loved us' is set against Yonge's insistence that More's 'truly valuable legacy was not only the example of what one woman could be, and could do, but a real influence on the tone of education in all classes of English women'.³ While this emphasis on More's gender is consistent with the overall tone of Yonge's text, Yonge's insistence also appears as an inspirational appeal to her female readers, as the author lays bare the didactic element of her biography: 'the example of what one woman could be, and could do'. Significantly, More's work for the education of the poor – men *and* women – as well as her role in the reform of social morality, is re-modelled by Yonge as work solely for the education of English women. This connection of More's philanthropy to campaigns for female education reveals the key question behind Yonge's biography: how could Hannah More, with her rural, Sunday school philanthropy, be repackaged for the modern female reader of 1888?

The question feels particularly pressing when the story of Hannah More and her version of womanhood is contrasted with the anonymously authored article 'The Glorified Spinster', which appeared in *Macmillan's Magazine* the same year as the publication of Yonge's *Hannah More*. Parodying the language of naturalists, the author notes 'the appearance of a new variety of the class *Homo* within the last two decades', which whilst outwardly conforming to the image of 'the class Spinster', is instead 'something differing considerably from

³ Henry Thompson, *Hannah More*, pp. 378-79; Charlotte Yonge, *Hannah More*, p. 196.

the ordinary female'. This 'something' different is the 'Glorified Spinster', a woman who possesses a 'self-reliant bearing', an 'air of having some definite business to perform in a definite time', and an 'agility in gaining the tops of omnibuses'.⁴ The Glorified Spinster is cultured, educated (most likely having attended Newnham College, Cambridge) and crucially, she is independent – being most definitely 'Not in the marriage market'.⁵ While the Glorified Spinster's concern for the public good connects her to the philanthropy of Hannah More and Charlotte Yonge, her rejection of marriage, along with her view of herself as intellectually equal to men emphasises her movement away from the values of the earlier female philanthropists and authors. Indeed, even as Yonge strove to re-imagine More for the young women of the late 1880s, by 1888 Yonge was also regarded as out of step with the times, and was now producing works increasingly aimed at the younger market and Sunday school audiences – including a story about Hannah and Martha More for young children entitled *The Cunning Woman's Grandson: A Tale of Cheddar A Hundred Years Ago*, and published in 1890.

If Charlotte Yonge was therefore not the most appropriate writer to convey the tradition of conservative reform and women's philanthropy in the parochial sphere to increasingly educated and urban modern young woman, then who was? One candidate can be found in Mary Ward – the granddaughter of Thomas Arnold of Rugby and niece of Matthew Arnold, and who wrote under her married name 'Mrs. Humphry Ward' when producing her fiction. Ward, born in 1851, was of a different generation to Yonge, and indeed, had her first piece of

⁴ Anon, 'The Glorified Spinster', *Macmillan's Magazine* 58 (September 1888), pp. 371-76, (p. 371).

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 374.

fiction 'A Gay Life' rejected by Yonge's magazine *The Monthly Packet* for being too focused on love and sexuality, with Yonge writing to the young Mary Arnold in 1870: 'I do not go in the principle of no love at all, and letting nobody marry, but I do not think it will do to have it the whole subject and interest of the story.'⁶ As well as writing stories that were too 'sexy' for Yonge, Ward was also far more political than her literary predecessor, and would become *the* prominent female campaigner against women's suffrage, as well as instrumental to the establishment of children's play centres, first in London, and then nationwide, due to her political lobbying of the president of the Board of Education, Augustine Birrell, in 1907.⁷ Like Yonge, Ward was interested in female education, but while Yonge maintained an influential friendship with the founding principal of Lady Margaret Hall, Dorothy Wordsworth, Ward went further and was a member of the committee that established Somerville Hall, Lady Margaret Hall's non-denominational rival. Indeed, it was Ward who came up with the name of Somerville – being inspired by 'the female astronomer who had taught herself algebra and calculus secretly'.⁸

Yet if Ward's close involvement with Somerville, as well as her later political activities, illustrate her differences from the sort of womanhood envisioned by Charlotte Yonge, it is also important to recognise the connections between the two writers and philanthropists. When contrasted with Cambridge's

⁶ Quoted in William Peterson, *Victorian Heretic*, (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1976), p. 53.

⁷ For further information about Ward and her campaign for children's play centres see Seth Koven, 'Borderlands: Women, Voluntary Action, and Child Welfare in Britain, 1840-1914', in *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Policies and the Origins of Welfare States*, ed. by Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 94-135, (p. 114).

⁸ John Sutherland, *Mrs Humphry Ward: Eminent Victorian, Pre-eminent Edwardian*, (Oxford: OUP, 1990; repr. 1991), p. 64.

Girton and Newnham Colleges, which were established almost a decade earlier than LMH and Somerville and were collegiate rather than merely residential, both Yonge's and Ward's connections to female education in Oxford appear less radical and far more cautious. This balance between educational reform and respect for tradition typifies Ward's investment in the longstanding narrative of conservative reform, which she sought to make relevant to the concerns and challenges of the late nineteenth century. Like Charlotte Yonge, Ward's conservative yet reforming social vision has seen her castigated by twentieth and twenty-first century scholars as a regressive, ultra-conservative figure – an image not helped by contemporary misinterpretations of Ward's anti-suffrage work. Ward is represented as another anti-feminist by Valerie Sanders in *Eve's Renegades*, and is also defined as 'behind her times' by Judith Wilt in *Behind Her Times: Transition England in the Novels of Mary Arnold Ward*.⁹ Moreover, as contemporary critics have rediscovered Ward and her novels, there also appears to be a sense of embarrassment around her *nom de plume*, which sees critics transform 'Mrs. Humphry Ward' into the apparently more palatable 'Mary Arnold Ward', 'Mary Ward', and 'Mary Augusta Ward' in their discussions of her fiction.¹⁰ While Ward used 'Mary A. Ward' to sign off her non-fictional writings, her choice of her marital name for her literary identity should not be brushed under the carpet as another sign of her awkwardly old-fashioned mindset. Rather, 'Mrs. Humphry Ward' illustrates Ward's canny exploitation of

⁹ See Valerie Sanders' *Eve's Renegades* for an extensive discussion of Ward and anti-feminism. Also, Judith Wilt, *Behind Her Times: Transition England in the Novels of Mary Arnold Ward*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Judith Wilt refers to Ward as 'Mary Arnold Ward' in *Behind Her Times*; Beth Sutton-Ramspeck calls her simply 'Mary Ward' in *Raising the Dust: The Literary Housekeeping of Mary Ward, Sarah Grant, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004); Sutton-Ramspeck and Nicole Meller use 'Mary Augusta Ward' in the Broadview edition of Ward's novel *Marcella*, (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2002).

her role as wife and mother in navigating the publishing marketplace of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (roles, which in real life she frequently neglected in the traditional sense), and thus typifies her central position in the female conservative reform narrative at the close of the Victorian era.

In emphasising Ward's connections to the narrative of conservative reform that informed the writings of Hannah More, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot and Charlotte Yonge, I demonstrate the significance of maternal philanthropy and the parochial sphere to Ward's writing during the period of 1888-1896. In his essay 'Borderlands: Women, Voluntary Action, and Child Welfare in Britain, 1840-1914', the historian Seth Koven identifies Ward as a proponent of 'civic maternalism', which he describes as 'a set of rhetorical strategies, attitudes, and ideas about the ways in which women's motherly capacities to love, nurture, and care for others were linked to the imperative to deploy these gifts within their local communities and municipalities'. Maternalism and localism were intertwined for Ward and represented a powerful social role for women. As Koven recognises, Ward's 'labours as a social reformer, child-welfare advocate, and opponent to suffrage' are all expressions of her civic maternalism, but crucially, so is her 1894 bestselling novel *Marcella*, and to a lesser extent, its 1896 sequel *Sir George Tressady*.¹¹ This chapter will explore both novels' engagement with maternal models of influence and ideas about the parochial sphere, as Ward offered the modern woman a traditional, yet contemporary, vision of her role in society.

¹¹ Koven, 'Borderlands', p. 108. Mrs Humphry Ward, *Sir George Tressady*, (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1896).

The insistence of this chapter on the reformism within Mrs. Humphry Ward's conservative perspective is supported by Julia Bush's work *Women Against the Vote: Female Anti-Suffragism in Britain*. Bush's history of the female anti-suffrage movement counters the ridicule directed at women like Mary Ward who publicly campaigned against their own enfranchisement, and in taking their political viewpoint seriously, Bush reveals the numerous continuities between the pro- and anti-suffrage camps, as well as the anti-suffragists' emphasis upon maternity (biological and civic) and the sphere of local politics as the most appropriate arena for late-Victorian and Edwardian women. Far from advocating the confinement of women to the family home, female anti-suffragists – and Ward in particular – offered a vision of woman as maternally and politically involved in the parochial sphere. For Bush, Ward was 'deeply committed to maternal social reform' and 'hoped to see a more productive integration between women's specialised work, centred upon their families and local communities, and the functions of national government'.¹²

This desire for an integration of women's maternal role in the community into the work of government thus at once illustrates the enduringly borderline state of female citizenship and power in the writings of Mrs. Humphry Ward, but conversely, also the immense value placed upon the parochial sphere by her fictional and political texts. Indeed, in the works 'An Appeal Against Female Suffrage' (jointly authored by Mary A. Ward and Louise Creighton), *Marcella*, and *Sir George Tressady*, Mrs. Humphry Ward presents women's own version of citizenship – one that is embedded within parochial, rather than parliamentary, space. Rather than revealing the anachronisms in Ward's model of female

¹² Bush, p. 313; pp. 315-16.

citizenship, her emphasis on female local government reflects the political landscape of the late 1880s and early 1890s. As Patricia Hollis identifies in her history *Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government 1865-1914*,

By the late 1890s [...] some fifteen hundred women were holding elected local office. They were members of London vestries, school and poor law boards, parish, rural, and urban district councils [...] Half a century before women obtained the parliamentary vote and held parliamentary seats, they had obtained the borough vote and been elected to local government office.¹³

In Hollis' work the story of local government is intertwined with women's history. The late nineteenth-century is depicted as the apex of local politics and also 'ladies elect', as Hollis notes that in the county of Norfolk, 'women were a stronger presence in local government in 1900 than in 1975.'¹⁴ Thus, the borderlands of the state that are so important to Ward's writing are also the spaces of female empowerment. Reading Ward's fiction inside this narrative of female local government, Ward's heroine Marcella Boyce is seen to lead both the country and the countryside via her philanthropy within the increasingly politicised communal sphere.

Crucially, Ward's work for her settlement project The Passmore Edwards Settlement and urban play centres for children, as well as the London sections of her novel *Marcella*, have often caused Ward to be discussed in relation to urban slums and philanthropy, as the works of Judith Walkowitz, Seth Koven, Ellen Ross and Beth Sutton-Ramspeck demonstrate.¹⁵ This emphasis on the urban

¹³ Patricia Hollis, *Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government 1865-1914*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. vii.

¹⁵ See Walkowitz, p. 58; Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004; repr. 2006), p. 220; Ellen Ross, *Slum Travelers: Ladies and London Poverty, 1860-1920*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 11;

aspects of Ward's writing arguably reflects the bias of contemporary scholarship more than the concerns of her fiction, as both *Marcella* and *Sir George Tressady* illustrate the author's deeply-held commitment to rural and local environments, and moreover, to the world of the country house and its surrounding estate. In his biography of Mrs. Humphry Ward John Sutherland reveals how Ward was fascinated by the aristocracy and the country house 'set' – both their elegance and their power: 'The lifestyle – its balls, country parties, aristocratic pastimes – was intergrafted with the high politics of England. These were also the families who ran the country from their high places.'¹⁶ In thus emphasising women's place in the local community, and also Marcella Boyce's role as lady of the manor in *Marcella* and *Sir George Tressady*, Ward was in fact placing her heroine in the most political sphere of them all.

These politics were both national *and* local, however. As Hollis comments in *Ladies Elect*, 'following the Third Reform Act of 1884, county councils and then parish and rural district councils were invented to provide rural administration' – essentially completing 'the new map of English local government'.¹⁷ As the political geography of the countryside transformed during the late nineteenth-century, these new rural councils offered more official forms of power for local women – a power potentially at odds with the traditional authority of the country house. Crucially, much of *Marcella* is concerned with ensuring the relationship between the rural community of Mellor and its two big houses, Maxwell Court and Mellor Park, and its heroine is represented as vital to

and Beth Sutton-Ramspeck, *Raising the Dust: The Literary Housekeeping of Mary Ward, Sarah Grant, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, pp. 181-82.

¹⁶ John Sutherland, p. 95.

¹⁷ Hollis, p. 3.

the success of these inter-class, parochial connections. While there is little presence of rural or parish councils in Ward's novel, the significance and influence accorded to Marcella arguably reflects the growing female authority in local governance, as much as the traditional power of the philanthropic heroine. The redefined country estate Ward presents us with at the conclusion of *Marcella* therefore both typifies her reforming conservatism, as the novel offers a local community guided by a maternal female aristocrat, and mirrors Ward's contemporary politics, as the national government – in the form of the country house – is transformed by local female activism. The country estate and its female proprietor in Ward's work thus embodies her vision of an evolving, yet traditional, England.

Nonetheless, there are problems within Ward's world of female philanthropy and parochial female citizenship, as her communal sphere is threatened by the attractions that public and parliamentary space maintained for women like Marcella. Whilst Marcella ultimately resists a grander conception of her social role, her moments as a 'political woman' in *Sir George Tressady* acknowledge the instabilities of Ward's empowered parochial philanthropy – instabilities made plain by her 1889 petition 'An Appeal Against Female Suffrage'. The fraught relationship between the public and parochial spheres in Ward's writing will thus be traced between 'An Appeal Against Female Suffrage', *Marcella* and *Sir George Tressady*, as the tradition of women's conservative reform writing sought to answer some of the key questions of the late 1880s and '90s.

Mary Ward and Louise Creighton,

‘An Appeal Against Female Suffrage’, *The Nineteenth Century*, June 1889

‘We, the undersigned, wish to appeal to the common sense and the educated thought of the men and women of England against the proposed extension of the Parliamentary suffrage to women.’¹⁸ With this opening statement, the authors of ‘An Appeal Against Female Suffrage’, Mary Ward and Louise Creighton, appear to wholeheartedly uphold the argument for separate gendered spheres of labour in Victorian society. Stressing essential physical differences between men and women, Ward and Creighton maintain that women’s ‘share in the working of the State machinery should be different from that assigned to men’: ‘To men belong the struggle of debate and legislation in Parliament [...] the working of the army and navy [...] the lead and supervision of English commerce’ and ‘the service of that merchant fleet on which our food supply depends.’ In all of these areas according to Ward and Creighton, ‘women’s direct participation is made impossible either by the disabilities of sex’ or by strong customs and habits ‘resting ultimately upon physical difference, against which it is useless to contend.’¹⁹ Unable to participate fully in the workings of the state, women should therefore be excluded from the franchise.

Nevertheless, as Julia Bush also recognises, whilst Ward and Creighton insist on women’s physical inferiority to men, their Appeal contains ‘only a brief mention of women’s inferiority in unsuitable roles’, before moving swiftly on to ‘an abundance of encouragement’ for women ‘to develop more appropriate and

¹⁸ Mary Ward and Louise Creighton, ‘An Appeal Against Female Suffrage’, *The Nineteenth Century* June 1889, pp. 781-88, (p. 781).

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 781.

character-forming “public usefulness” outside of the parliamentary state. For Bush, ‘Never had the “physical force” argument been expressed in more attractive terms to a female audience’, and moreover, as opposed to the male anti-suffragists of the 1870s and 1880s, Ward and Creighton kept their ‘dignified’ arguments away from any analysis of women’s ‘political deficits’.²⁰ Crucially, while women are represented as *physically* weaker than men, the Appeal gives little time to arguments concerning women’s *mental* weakness, and instead insists on the significance of the continued advances in women’s education throughout its narrative. This connection of the women’s anti-suffrage argument to progress in female education – schools and universities – anticipates Ward’s description of her work in Oxford during the late 1870s for the establishment of Somerville Hall (later Somerville College) in her 1918 memoir

A Writer’s Recollections:

I was the first secretary of Somerville Hall, and it fell to me, by chance, to suggest the name of the future college. My friends and I were all on fire for women’s education, including women’s medical education, and very emulous of Cambridge, where the movement was already far advanced.

But hardly any of us were at all on fire for woman suffrage, wherein the Oxford educational movement differed greatly from the Cambridge movement. The majority, certainly, of the group to which I belonged at Oxford were at the time persuaded that the development of women’s power in the State – or rather, in such a state as England, with its far-reaching and Imperial obligations, resting ultimately on the sanction of war – should be on lines of its own. We believed that growth through Local Government, and perhaps through some special machinery for bringing the wishes and influence of women of all classes to bear on Parliament, other than the Parliamentary vote, was the real line of progress.²¹

²⁰ Bush, p. 150; p. 152.

²¹ Mrs. Humphry Ward, *A Writer’s Recollections*, Vol. I, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1918), pp. 203-204.

Hence, although in seeking to prevent women's access to the Parliamentary vote, Ward and Creighton's Appeal can be read as regressive and yet another instance of Mrs. Humphry Ward being behind her times, the Appeal's commitment to female education (both Ward and Creighton played instrumental roles in the founding of Somerville) also enables a more progressive interpretation of the petition, which supports Sutton-Ramspeck's more positive reading of Ward and her writings. Yet rather than illustrating one argument or the other – Mrs. Humphry Ward's regressivism, or Mrs. Humphry Ward's progressivism – these fluctuations between campaigns *for* women's higher education and *against* female suffrage in fact reveal the significance of the conservative reform narrative to Ward's understanding of gender and nineteenth-century society, as the author seeks a gradual, but contained, form of social progress for women. Rather than demonstrating Ward's backward stance in history, or even her transitional place as the Victorian era gave way to the changes of the Edwardians, Ward's support for conservative reform underlines her central position in the debates of the 1880s and 1890s, as well as her inheritance of a flexible and evolving female narrative that had its origins in the close of the previous century.

Ward's reference to local government in her discussion of female suffrage in *A Writer's Recollections* draws attention to *the* essential argument at the heart of 'An Appeal Against Female Suffrage': women's work in the parochial sphere. Although the Appeal asserted the necessity of dividing women from Parliament, it equally – and forcefully – asserted women's rightful claim

over their local communities both as philanthropists and local politicians.²²

While this distinction between local and national politics may strike us today as inconsistent (and indeed, appeared contradictory to the suffragists of the time), this divide is central to the Appeal's gendered notion of citizenship.²³ The men may control 'the State' that 'rest[s] upon force' but it is the women who rule the local sphere:

we are heartily in sympathy with all the recent efforts which have been made to give women a more important part in those affairs of the community where their interests and those of men are equally concerned [...] As voters for or members of School Boards, Boards of Guardians, and other important public bodies, women have now opportunities for public usefulness [...] All these changes of recent years, together with the great improvements in women's education which have accompanied them, we cordially welcome. [...] The care of the sick and the insane; the treatment of the poor; the education of children: in all these matters, and others besides, they have made good their claim to larger and more extended powers.²⁴

Thus rather than reading Ward as committed to a domestic vision of womanhood as many critics have maintained, it is more appropriate to understand the author as supportive of a female parochial sphere and a male public, parliamentary sphere. Crucially, the Appeal offers a broader notion of citizenship than that offered by the suffrage cause. For Ward and Creighton, citizenship is a communal act: 'we hold that citizenship is not dependent upon or identical with the possession of the suffrage. Citizenship lies in the participation

²² This assertion directly contradicts Patricia Hollis' argument in *Ladies Elect* that, 'Not until 1907 did Mrs. Humphry Ward encourage Tory women to work in and stand for local government when she formed her Local Government Advancement Committee. Surprisingly, given the "domestic" quality of local government work, Tory women remained largely indifferent.' Hollis, p. 58.

²³ See Bush, p. 16 for a discussion of local government and anti-suffrage.

²⁴ Ward and Creighton, p. 782.

of each individual in effort for the good of the community.’²⁵ Moreover, with women’s communal work being defined as caring for the unfortunate and educating children (along with other unspecified acts), it is evident that for Ward, women’s ‘extended powers’ in the local sphere are maternal powers, and thus their citizenship is rooted within the traditions of the maternalist narrative.

Yet it is also misleading to understand ‘An Appeal Against Female Suffrage’ as an attack on women interested in national politics. As Ward’s public works and novels testify, she maintained a lifelong fascination for and extensive knowledge of parliamentary affairs. While Ward and Creighton in the Appeal reject women’s right to suffrage, they maintain the need for female influence in politics – what they term the ‘higher State which rests on thought, conscience, and moral influence’.²⁶ As the authors describe women’s moral power over the British government, their views are in keeping with the assessment of nineteenth-century female citizenship as borderline, although for Ward and Creighton this position in the political margins is something to be celebrated and protected, for it is only from the margins that women can uphold their moral disinterest:

On what does this moral influence depend? We believe that it depends largely on [...] sympathy and disinterestedness. [...] It is notoriously difficult to maintain them in the presence of party necessities and in the heat of party struggle. Were women admitted to this struggle, their natural eagerness and quickness of temper would probably make them hotter partisans than men. As their political relations stand at present, they tend to check in them the disposition to partisanship, and to strengthen in them the qualities of sympathy and disinterestedness.²⁷

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 783.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 782.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 783.

To be on the limits of political citizenship thus enables women to act as limiters of male partisanship and immoral competition. Indeed, the Appeal can be seen to be preoccupied with limits in more ways than one, as it explores women's unique and 'natural' position in the political margins of society, and also sets about establishing the limits to women's progress: 'we believe that the emancipating process has now reached the limits fixed by the physical constitution of women, and by the fundamental difference which must always exist between their main occupations and those of men.'²⁸ If women were emancipated beyond these natural limits the Appeal speculates terrifying and swift social changes that are never spelt out but are linked to working-class enfranchisement and radicalism of the masses:

remember that great electoral changes have been carried out during recent years. Masses of new electors have been added to the constituency. These new elements have still to be assimilated [...] we protest against any further alteration in our main political machinery, especially when it is an alternation which involves a new principle of extraordinary range and significance.²⁹

As Bush comments, 'The Appeal played cleverly upon fears of advancing democracy' and with its emphasis on educating the 'new electors' enfranchised by the Third Reform Act of 1884 'to take their part in the national work', once again Ward and Creighton's text can be understood within the context of the conservative reform narrative.³⁰

Yet if Ward and Creighton were able to assert confidently that women were 'notoriously indifferent' to the suffrage cause and that 'there has been no serious and general demand' for the vote, the inherent contradictions of female

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 782.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 784.

³⁰ Bush, p. 151; Ward and Creighton, p. 784.

borderline citizenship were also laid bare by the demands of their Appeal.³¹ As the authors sought female signatories for the conclusion of their petition, they frequently discovered that whilst many notable women were supportive of the anti-suffrage position, most were reluctant to declare themselves in public. Julia Bush details in *Women Against the Vote* the numerous difficulties and refusals Ward and Creighton encountered in canvassing for their 104 female signatures, as leading public women such as Florence Nightingale declined for fear of embarrassing the government, their husbands, upsetting their friends, or ‘were inhibited by unexpressed fears of overstepping the bounds of feminine propriety.’ As such, Bush argues, ‘it would be wrong to assume that the 104 women whose signatures were eventually published alongside the Women’s Appeal were necessarily all first-choice candidates.’³² It appeared that women who supported their borderline position of moral influence in society found it difficult to cross this threshold to support their position in public. This central inconsistency of publicly defending women’s right to reject the public sphere is, as Bush also recognises, one of the central ‘recurrent problems’ of the Appeal and the wider anti-suffrage campaign, as Bush asks, ‘How could women supporters exert their influence without contradicting their own abstentionist beliefs?’³³

In order to bolster this fraught aspect of the anti-suffrage argument, the editor of the *Nineteenth Century*, James Knowles, concluded Ward and Creighton’s petition with an appeal for more female signatures from his readers – enclosing a detachable signing slip to be returned directly to the journal that

³¹ Ward and Creighton, p. 784.

³² Bush, pp. 146-47.

³³ *Ibid*, pp. 141-42.

protested ‘strongly against the proposed Extension of the Parliamentary Franchise to Women’. Significantly, Knowles threatens his female readers with the dangerous implications of their silence, thereby underlining the inherent problem of women’s borderline relation to the public sphere:

The difficulty of obtaining a public expression, even of disapproval, about such a question from those who entirely object to mixing themselves up in the coarsening struggles of party political life, may easily become a public danger. Their silence will be misinterpreted into indifference or consent to designs they most dislike, and may thus help to bring them about.³⁴

Yet with this final warning of ‘public danger’, Knowles problematises his female authors’ contemporary and celebratory vision of a female citizenship rooted in parochial issues and politics. As Bush maintains, the editor’s ‘mixture of threats and blandishments is in interesting contrast to the more dignified tone of the Appeal’, but this contrast serves only to illustrate the tensions within Ward and Creighton’s vision of an empowered parochial womanhood.³⁵ While ‘An Appeal Against Female Suffrage’ praises women’s work in the parochial sphere and emphasises the significance of the community to citizenship over the partisanship of Parliament, this position is shown to depend upon public statements for its survival. It is this tension between the parochial and the public that the discussion will now turn to in examining Mrs. Humphry Ward’s representation of female philanthropy and the community in her novels *Marcella* and *Sir George Tressady*.

³⁴ James Knowles, ‘Postscript’, in ‘An Appeal Against Female Suffrage’, *The Nineteenth Century*, June 1889, p 788.

³⁵ Bush, p. 149.

Mrs. Humphry Ward

Marcella (1894)

Marcella opens with a view: ‘The mists – and the sun – and the first streaks of yellow in the beeches – beautiful – *beautiful!*’ This view is of the landscape of the Chilterns as seen from a window in Mellor Park - ‘the old home’ of the Boyce family – and with it, Mrs. Humphry Ward underlines two central aspects of the social vision expressed in her novel – rural England and the big house. Yet even as Ward’s heroine Marcella Boyce ‘devours’ the scene before her, it is evident that the relationship between Mellor Park and its surrounding environment is not as it should be. The park’s avenue is missing ‘a gate of some importance’, the garden paths are ‘choked’ with weeds, and the gravel terrace is made ‘unsightly’ by ‘tufts of grass’. While the history of Mellor Park is unimpeachable, with its old trees and ‘beautiful Jacobean staircase’, Ward repeatedly stresses that both house and its surroundings have fallen into serious disrepair. It is Marcella who feels this disrepair the most keenly out of all her family, and thus it is also Marcella – the youngest generation of her family – who will attempt to restore her family home to its former glory, and in doing so, reconnect Mellor Park to its rural community in a way that is fitting for the end of the nineteenth century. According to the values of *Marcella*, Mellor Park must be restored, but it also must become relevant to society again.³⁶

Marcella’s relationship with her family is not straight forward either, however. As Ward describes the dilapidations of Mellor Park, her narrative also plots the heroine’s fractured connection with her parents, as from the age of nine

³⁶ Ward, *Marcella*, p. 35.

Marcella has lived away from her family – at a succession of schools and then finally as an art student in South Kensington. For most of her life Marcella has felt herself a burden on her family, and now at the age of twenty-one and called by her parents to join them at Mellor Park, her filial relationships – especially with her mother – are informed by a strong sense of distance. Marcella’s mother frequently adopts an ironical or critical pose towards her daughter that serves to undercut the hyperbole of Marcella’s aspirations. When Marcella mentions dropping in on the local church to her parents at breakfast, her mother smiles at ‘The Lady Bountiful airs that Marcella had already assumed during the weeks she had been in the house’ – these airs, the narrator notes, have ‘entertained Mrs. Boyce exceedingly’.³⁷ While Marcella is characterised as full of sympathy, her mother is repeatedly depicted as detached: ‘There was a satiric detachment in her tone which contrasted sharply with Marcella’s amused but sympathetic interest. *Detachment* was perhaps the characteristic note of Mrs. Boyce’s manner’.³⁸ As Judith Wilt comments in *Behind Her Times*, this contrast between closeness and distance is mimicked by Ward’s narrative, which ‘situates itself alternately in the “dry” observant gaze associated in the first chapter and confirmed in the last book as that of Marcella’s aloof and intelligent mother, and in the sentimental turmoil of the daughter’s starved heart and busy new woman’s brain’. This fluctuation enables the reader to understand Marcella’s misguided emotions and her need to improve society, as well as maintain a critical view of her methods. Significantly, it also underlines the fractured mother-daughter relationship at the heart of *Marcella* by inscribing it into the novel’s very narrative structure. Wilt regards the narrator’s ironic stance towards Marcella and her philanthropy as the

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 52.

³⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 51-52.

‘absent maternal gaze’, and while the scholar does not pursue the implications of this concept, the idea of Ward’s critical narrator as the absent mother both draws out the gulf between Marcella and the narrative of social maternalism for much of the story, and also charts the journey Marcella will have to make towards her mother by the novel’s conclusion if her philanthropic schemes are to be regarded with anything more than sympathy tempered by satirical amusement.³⁹

Yet if Marcella’s relationship with her parents is strained, it is clear that she takes great pride in her family history, and in particular, the stories of her great-uncle, who ‘had been a famous Speaker of the House of Commons.’⁴⁰ This pride, however, also alerts the reader to Marcella’s veneration of public power and her desire for power of her own – an idea underlined by the account of her time with the Venturist Society in London as an art student. With their gradual socialism and uncommitted politics, the Venturist Society is evidently a portrait of the Fabian Society, and as Ward describes Marcella coming under the influence of some its members, the experiences she draws on echo those undergone by Ward’s friend and sometimes colleague Beatrice Webb (nee Potter), who was also a rent collector and later a Fabian in the 1880s and ‘90s:

His influence made Marcella a rent-collector under a lady friend of his in the East End; because of it, she worked herself beyond her strength in a joint attempt made by some members of the Venturist Society to organise a Tailoresses’ Union; and, to please him, she read articles and blue-books on Sweating and Overcrowding. It was all very moving and dramatic; so, too, was the persuasion Marcella divined in her friends, that she was destined in time, with work and experience, to great things and high places in the movement.⁴¹

³⁹ Wilt, p. 88.

⁴⁰ Ward, *Marcella*, p. 40.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 48.

In this passage, the ironical narrator indicates the insubstantial nature of Marcella's politics, as her socialist convictions are depicted as motivated by a man's admiration for her, but also, and importantly, by her pleasure in the authority she sees herself as possessing within the movement. Crucially, both of these issues – Marcella's delight in male admiration and love of personal power – are seen to have serious consequences once Marcella becomes Marcella Boyce of Mellor Park at the opening of the novel. Unlike her wistful memories of her days in South Kensington, Marcella now occupies a position of status in her community, and it remains to be seen how she will use this new power in a rural neighbourhood charged with a coming general election.

Marcella's arrival at Mellor has brought her for the first time into contact with the realities of rural life and the rural poor: 'In London the agricultural labourer, of whom she had heard much, had been to her as a pawn in the game of discussion. Here he was in the flesh; and she was called upon to live with him, and not only to talk about him.' Yet while Marcella has 'gone in and out of their cottages' in her determination to live with and know the rural poor, it is not clear if she is really seeing her neighbours 'in the flesh' after all, or if rather, she is continuing to view the local community according to her own agenda.⁴² As Marcella ponders marrying her neighbour and the heir to the nearby Maxwell estate, Aldous Raeburn, who is evidently attracted to her, she considers what their marriage might do for their poor neighbours. Nonetheless, it is not the neighbours themselves that Marcella considers so much as the pleasures of being known as the saviour of the poor. In Marcella's vision, the parochial sphere is a

⁴² *Ibid*, pp. 61-62.

sphere to be conquered and ruled as either Marcella Boyce of Mellor Park, or Marcella Raeburn of Maxwell Court:

What was stirring in her was really a passionate ambition – ambition to be the queen and arbitress of human lives – to be believed in by her friends, to make a mark for herself among women, and to make it in the most romantic and natural way

[...]

Of course, if it happened, people would say that she had tried to capture Aldous Raeburn for his money and position's sake. Let them say it. People with base minds must think basely; there was no help for it. Those whom she would make her friends would know very well for what purpose she wanted money, power, and the support of such a man, and such a marriage.

[...]

'I could revive the straw-plaiting; give them better teaching and better models. The cottages should be rebuilt. Papa would willingly hand the village over to me if I found the money! [...] One might be the ruler, the regenerator of half a county!'

[...]

Then she was ashamed of herself and rejected the whole image with vehemence. Dependence was the curse of the poor. Her whole aim of course should be to teach them to stand on their own feet, to know themselves as men. But naturally they would be grateful, they would let themselves be led.⁴³

As Jane Lewis states in *Women and Social Action in Victorian and Edwardian England*, 'Marcella is inspired not so much by the desire to serve others but by the attraction of exerting power over others'.⁴⁴ Whilst Ward's heroine has flashes of self-awareness, Marcella is unable to resist her fantasies of public power, since despite her shame in imagining her neighbours' dependence upon her, only one page later we see her walking down to the village, 'teeming with plans for *her new kingdom*', which she 'could not keep herself out of' (emphasis added).⁴⁵ Yet upon arriving at the cottage rented by the Hurd family,

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 101.

⁴⁴ Jane Lewis, *Women and Social Action in Victorian and Edwardian England*, (Aldershot: Edward Elgar Publishing, 1991), p. 209.

⁴⁵ Ward, *Marcella*, p. 102.

whom Marcella has especially taken up as one of her cases, it is soon apparent that Marcella does not know – or truly see – the local rural community at all. As either the saviour of the poor, or the socialist agitator educating them in their rights, Marcella fails to understand or appreciate her neighbours as individuals, and they remain pawns in her game. This failure indicates not only the delusions behind Marcella's dream of public power and making 'a mark for herself among women', but also, and more seriously for the novel, her inability to guide and influence the parochial sphere.

While Marcella can only see the Hurd family – and by extension, all of the poor – as helpless creatures, Ward indicates the existence of another narrative about the rural community, which sees individuals come together as neighbours to support each other through hard times, but also, to enjoy themselves and share stories. Thus when Marcella comes to visit the Hurds' with news about a potential job for the unemployed father of the household, she is 'astonished' to see that Minta Hurd is having a tea-party with her friends and neighbours.⁴⁶ Once over this astonishment, Marcella quickly settles into the party. But she does not learn anything from the gathering – seeing 'these village people [...] like figures in poetry or drama' and unconsciously shifting between the poses of Lady Bountiful and socialist visionary. Significantly however, 'these village people' see through Marcella's performance. When Marcella offers Mrs. Jellison apples for her grandson, 'the best we've got', Mrs. Jellison takes the fruit with a composed 'I dare say he'll eat them. He eats most things', rather than with any protestations of gratitude or helplessness.⁴⁷ Marcella's hollow words of comfort

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 102.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 103.

about the death of Mrs. Jellison's husband and Mrs. Brunt's daughter – events which she knows only of second-hand - are repeatedly set against the banter and shared memory of the others there, as if to underline Marcella's status as an outsider and an uninvited guest at Minta's tea party. Inside the Hurds' cottage it is clear that Marcella – despite what she may think – is not a part of this community.

This is underlined even further by Marcella's questioning of Mr. Patton – 'a Radical and a rebel once in old rick-burning days' – about poaching.⁴⁸ Marcella is unable to appreciate how such a question may be regarded suspiciously by the man, despite her insistence on her hatred of game laws. While Patton eventually replies to Marcella, the scene is marked by awkward silence on the one hand and Marcella's dramatic speeches about a socialist future on the other, which she says more for herself than for the benefit of her audience: 'It excited her to say these things to these people, to these poor tottering old things [...] She saw herself, as the preacher, sitting on her stool beside the poor grate'.⁴⁹ As Mrs. Jellison shrewdly comments, 'The young lady speaks beautiful, just like a book she do', but Marcella fails to understand the implications of speaking 'like a book' to real people. The party remains a 'little spectacle' to Marcella throughout, and as she watches her neighbours, Ward's heroine appears almost offended by their ability to bring amusement and companionship to each other's lives.⁵⁰ Marcella's continued astonishment at the happiness and resilience of the poor emphasises her disconnect with the rural community, as well as her

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 105.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 109.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 110; p. 112.

inability to value her neighbours as individuals – key aspects of Mrs. Humphry Ward's social vision:

Amazing! Starvation wages; hardships of sickness and pain; horrors of birth and horrors of death; wholesale losses of kindred and friends; the meanest of surroundings; the most sordid cares – of this mingled cup of village fate every person in the room had drunk, and drunk deep. Yet here in this autumn twilight they laughed and chattered and joked – weird, wrinkled children, enjoying an hour's rough play in a clearing of the storm!

[...]

Yes, the old people were past hoping for; mere wreck and driftwood on the shore, the spring-tide of death would soon have swept them all into unremembered graves. But the young men and women, the children, were they too to grow up, and grow old like these – the same smiling, stunted, ignobly submissive creatures? One woman at least would do her best with her one poor life to rouse some of them to discontent and revolt!⁵¹

The tension that Marcella's question about poaching brings to Minta's party anticipates the controversy that debates around poaching and the landed estate will bring to the country community. As Beth Sutton-Ramspeck and Nicole Meller note in their introduction to the Broadview Press edition of *Marcella*, the poaching storyline 'embodies one of the novel's central thematic concerns [...] the conflict between the rich and the poor'.⁵² Famously, *Marcella's* discussion of poaching was inspired by a similar case that occurred on the Hertfordshire estate Stocks, which Ward and her family moved into in 1892. While the poaching and murder of two gamekeepers on Stocks land preceded the Wards' arrival, the author writes that 'naturally the little community, as it lay in its rural quiet beneath its wooded hills, was still, when we first entered it, under the shock and excitement of the tragedy'.⁵³ Ward's sense of

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 112.

⁵² Beth Sutton-Ramspeck and Nicole B. Meller, 'Introduction', in *Marcella*, Mrs. Humphry Ward, (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2002), pp. 11-27, (p. 17).

⁵³ Ward, *A Writer's Recollections*, p. 145.

the tragedy pervading the seeming rural quiet can be contrasted with Marcella's own inability to perceive the dramas embedded within country life. Significantly, what Marcella fails to realise as she preaches about the injustice of the game laws is that Minta's husband, Jim Hurd, is in fact poaching on both Boyce and Maxwell land. Marcella thus unwittingly occupies both sides of the rural conflict – as a member of the landed elite for Jim Hurd to defy and steal from, but also as a sympathiser and unconscious promoter of Hurd's crime, as Marcella brings him her radical newspapers that encourage attacks upon land and privilege. Indeed, as Wilt argues also, Marcella is increasingly implicated with the role of the poacher as the narrative progresses and Marcella repeatedly antagonises fellow members of her class and community. For Wilt, Marcella 'romances, embraces, becomes, the poverty-stricken poacher on the estate' and this transformation is first hinted at in Marcella's tense conversations with her mother after becoming engaged to Aldous:

'Isn't it, on the whole, probable that he knows more about the country than you do, Marcella?'
 Marcella sat up with sudden energy and gathered her walking things together.
 'It isn't knowledge that's the question, mamma; it's the principle of the thing.'⁵⁴

Marcella's strained relations with her class and her affiliation with the poacher are then brought to the fore as she openly argues with Aldous and his friend Frank Leven about game and game-keeping. Rudely attacking the men who are guests in her home, Marcella disturbs even the socialist Edward Hallin, who equally objects to the game laws. Hallin sees Marcella's dramatic posturing as 'more than was warranted by the conversation', and more worryingly, reads

⁵⁴ Wilt, p. 89; Ward, *Marcella*, p. 158.

her arguments about game, while ostensibly directed at Leven, as actually aimed at Aldous to wound and assert her power over him and his estate: ‘But a girl that can talk politics – hostile politics – to her lover, and mean them too – or am I inexperienced? – and is it merely that she is so much interested in him that she wants to be quarrelling with him?’⁵⁵ These indirect attacks upon her lover reiterate the connections between Marcella and Hurd, who regards his poaching as retaliation for the rich’s abuse of power towards the poor: ‘The poor were downtrodden, but they were coming to their rights. The land and its creatures were for the people!’⁵⁶ As Marcella mimics the behaviour of the poacher, she ends her argument with Aldous and Leven by announcing her intention to attend the political meeting in favour of the Liberal candidate for the general election, Harry Wharton, despite having previously refused to attend any of those in favour of Aldous’ candidacy on behalf of the Conservative party. Marcella’s question, ‘Mayn’t I go where I belong [...] where my convictions lead me?’ and her refusal of loyalty to her fiancée indicate the line she has crossed in her politicisation of the parochial sphere.⁵⁷

As with her growing distance from her own class, Marcella is also seen to antagonise the local clergyman, Mr. Harden, and his sister Mary. The tense relationship between Ward’s female philanthropist and the clergyman echoes earlier altercations seen between women and the clergy in *The Life of Hannah More*, *Shirley*, *My Lady Ludlow* and *The Clever Woman of the Family*, and underlines the power contests that inform female writers’ representations of women and the parochial sphere across the period. This power contest is hinted

⁵⁵ Ward, *Marcella*, p. 173; p. 174.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 153.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 176.

at from the start of *Marcella*, as Mrs. Boyce regards her daughter's visiting of the church and the Hardens as an example of Marcella's tendency to take on 'Lady Bountiful airs' with the local community.⁵⁸ As Mrs. Boyce ironically asks Marcella, 'I suppose Mr.. Harden and his sister remind you of your London Socialist friends, Marcella?' Marcella's response reveals her dismissive view of the work the Hardens undertake in the village: 'Oh! well – I don't know [...] Mr. Harden is very kind – but – he doesn't seem to have thought much about things.'⁵⁹ Unlike Mr. Gray of *My Lady Ludlow*, Harden typifies for Marcella the backward-looking nature of the clergy – disconnected from the current thought and current issues.

Yet, simultaneously, Ward's heroine is also takes a traditional view of the clergy when it suits her, as she regards Mellor Church as 'the property [...] of the big house'.⁶⁰ While Mary Harden has 'fallen in love with Miss Boyce from the beginning' and believes that Marcella has 'been divinely sent to sustain her brother and herself in the disheartening task of civilising Mellor', it is evident that Marcella does not see herself as the helper of the Hardens but their ruler, sent to lead the two into a new social age.⁶¹ Thus when Mary attempts to warn Marcella that Jim Hurd is in all likelihood, still poaching, Marcella arrogantly rejects such a suggestion with the statement, 'He promised me'. Marcella's refusal to listen to Mary illustrates her refusal to learn about rural life from the individuals who have a deep and long-standing experience of the countryside – such as Aldous Raeburn and the Hardens – in favour of her books on social

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 52.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 53.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 58.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p. 62.

theory and the speeches of Edward Wharton, the seemingly radical MP.

Crucially, despite her earlier love for Marcella, Mary is increasingly ‘a trifle jealous – divinely jealous – for her brother’ as ‘Marcella’s unbounded confidence in her own power and right over Mellor, her growing tendency to ignore anybody else’s right or power, sometimes set Mary aflame, for Charles’ sake’.⁶²

The women’s disagreement over Jim Hurd – whether he is poaching, whether it is right to rouse him with radical politics – thus symbolises the battle for power taking place between the Lady Bountiful and the clergy in Mellor, as well as foreshadows the violent rupture between Marcella and her community that occurs once Hurd’s poaching is brought to light. Marcella’s commitment to politics is set against Mary’s ‘homely’, practical thinking by Ward here, as the heroine insists on politicising the parochial sphere in a way that is totally unsuitable for members of a rural community:

‘Charles says Mr. Wharton’s influence in the village is very bad,’ she said quickly. ‘He makes everybody discontented; sets everybody by the ears; and, after all, what can he do for anybody?’
 ‘But that’s just what he wants to do – to make them discontented,’ cried Marcella. ‘Then, if they vote for him, that’s the first practical step towards improving their life.’
 ‘But it won’t give them more wages or keep them out of the public house,’ said Mary bewildered. She came of a homely middle-class stock, accustomed to a small range of thinking, and a high standard of doing. Marcella’s political opinions were an amazement, and on the whole a scandal to her. She preferred generally to give them a wide berth. Marcella did not reply. It was not worth while to talk to Mary on these topics.⁶³

In supporting Wharton over Mary, Marcella reveals her preference for the world of politics and public speaking, rather than the ‘high standard of doing’

⁶² *Ibid*, p. 194.

⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 195.

and ‘small range of thinking’ demanded by life and work in the parochial sphere. Marcella’s belief in discontent echoes her earlier scorn for Minta’s tea party and the way the poor are able to bring comfort and companionship to each other’s lives. In opting for community discord, Marcella illustrates her rejection of local values and also the narrative of conservative reform, as she instead promotes radical social change – supporting the ‘stealing’ advocated by Wharton and implicitly, the violent theft carried out by Hurd.⁶⁴ Yet in doing so, Marcella only reveals her own desire for – and attraction to – great political power.

Marcella’s connection to both Hurd’s poaching and Wharton’s political thievery is underlined during the night after the ball at Maxwell Court, which Marcella has attended as Aldous’ fiancée. After upsetting Aldous’ guests, Marcella returns home late and has a chance encounter with Wharton in her library. As the two look out of the window they see Hurd in the moonlight prowling with his gun: “‘It is *Hurd!*’” she cried in a tone of distress, pressing her face against the glass. “‘Out at this time, and with a gun! Oh, dear, dear!’” Wharton uses Marcella’s disappointment and their discussion of poaching to allude to his romantic feelings for her, which then leads to a kiss: ‘He – may escape his risk. Give your pity, Miss Boyce, rather to one – who has not escaped!’⁶⁵ As Marcella rushes away, Wharton hears the shot of the poacher’s gun. Their illicit kiss is thus framed by the presence and the violence of the poacher; emphasising the antagonistic relationship Marcella and Wharton maintain with the rural community that both speak so much about. As dawn arrives and Marcella struggles with her guilt and shame, it transpires that the

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 198.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 236-37.

sound of the gunshot was not Hurd poaching, but his killing of Aldous' gamekeeper Westall. Marcella's betrayal of Aldous and by extension, his vision of conservative social reform, has caused her to be associated with the violence of the murderer.

Upon learning of the murder, Marcella rushes to the Hurds' cottage. She enters in defiance of Aldous' remonstrations (who is at the scene in the form of magistrate) and phrases her desire to do so in terms of altruistic concern: 'I am going to *her* [...] don't wait.' Yet it is apparent that mingled with Marcella's sympathy for the plight of Minta Hurd, is her same desire for authority, as well as her constant need to challenge Aldous. Whilst none of the village are allowed to enter the Hurds' house – including Jim Hurd's own sister – Marcella uses her status as Miss Boyce of Mellor to gain admittance and thus gain control over the scene. Importantly, she does not think of securing admittance for the 'weeping' sister, who has to be 'supported by two others'.⁶⁶ Once inside, the narrator indicates further problems with Marcella's philanthropy. Although she cares for Minta and her children; making a fire and laying out their breakfast; these images of nurture are undermined by Ward's use of the word "“mothered”" to describe them, as the inverted commas create a distance between Marcella and actual maternal concern and imply a superficiality to Marcella's actions. This superficiality is then emphasised by Marcella's 'passionate joy that this pity, this tendance was allowed to her', as the nursing of Minta and her family whilst her husband is taken to prison for murder becomes an effective method for Marcella to ease her guilty conscience over her kiss with Wharton.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p. 242.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 247.

Indeed, Marcella quickly uses the tragedy to attack Aldous, thereby further deflecting her shame over her behaviour. She argues with her fiancé over his compassion towards the victims and his view of Hurd as a murderer – ensuring that once and for all, she is on the side of the poacher against the landowner: ‘If *you* will not help me to protect him – then I must look to someone else.’⁶⁸ For Valerie Sanders, these arguments between Marcella and Aldous exemplify the novel’s ‘long and hard’ ‘debate [...] about the advantages and disadvantages of marriage’, as Marcella’s championing of Hurd associates her with ‘potential, even actual revolt against men and patriarchal tradition’.⁶⁹ Yet this reading ignores the communal aspect to Marcella’s dispute with Aldous. Rather than symbolising her rejection of marriage, Marcella’s defence of Hurd against Aldous typifies her desire to lead Mellor, as well her overwhelming attraction to a more flamboyant form of power, since she quickly brings Wharton in as Hurd’s barrister. Thus while Marcella does delay her wedding to Aldous under the excuse of helping the Hurds, this delay must be considered alongside Marcella’s equally dramatic rupture with the Hardens, who also regard Hurd as guilty: ‘Tell your brother from me, Mary [...] that his God is to *me* just a constable in the service of English game-laws! If He *is* such a one, I at least will fling my Everlasting No at him while I live.’⁷⁰ Ward depicts Marcella and Aldous’ marriage as the property of the community, as all their neighbours – rich and poor – speculate on its postponement: ‘there was curiously little sympathy with Marcella. Most of her own class thought it a piece of posing [...] while the Mellor cottagers, with the instinctive English recoil from any touch of sentiment,

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 252.

⁶⁹ Sanders, *Eve’s Renegades*, p. 87; p. 89.

⁷⁰ Ward, *Marcella*, p. 274.

not, so to speak, in the bargain, gossiped and joked about it freely.’⁷¹ In delaying her marriage to campaign for Hurd’s release, Marcella is thus rejecting the values of the parochial sphere, just as much as the role demanded of her as Aldous’ wife.

After Hurd’s execution for murder, Marcella breaks off her engagement to Aldous, citing their disagreement over the crime as stark proof of their incompatibility. Yet even as she does so, Aldous emphasises the hypocrisy of her politics – ‘you talk of justice – you talk of equality – is the only man who can get neither at your hands – the man whom you promised to marry!’ – as well as provokes her confession about her kiss with Wharton.⁷² In pledging her allegiance to the radical MP, ‘who showed me such possibilities in *myself* – such new ways of using one’s life’, Marcella brings about the total separation between herself and Aldous, and thus between herself and the world of Mellor.⁷³ It is therefore no surprise that as the third book of *Marcella* opens, we find ourselves in London and the world of Wharton’s political machinations – the public sphere that for most of the narrative Marcella, as the great-niece of a former Speaker of the House, has so deeply idolised and yearned for. Yet Marcella herself is not to be found amongst the *salons* that Wharton frequents, or even in the Ladies’ Gallery of the House of Commons, but living and working amongst the urban poor as a district nurse. As noted, this London section of *Marcella* has received more critical attention than most of the novel’s rural scenes, from references by Judith Walkowitz in *The City of Dreadful Delight*, Ellen Ross in *Slum Travellers* and Seth Koven in *Slumming*, to a more extended discussion by Beth Sutton-

⁷¹ *Ibid*, p. 280.

⁷² *Ibid*, p. 313.

⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 314.

Ramspeck in *Raising the Dust* and Valerie Sanders in *Eve's Renegades*. Much of this attention can be ascribed to the traditional preference of history and literature scholarship towards urban settings over the rural or provincial, but also to a more recent interest in the professionalisation of women's roles at the end of the nineteenth century, which Marcella's training and work as a nurse clearly indicates.

Yet Marcella's work as a nurse also illustrates her attempts to parochialise London's slums and make a community out of the urban, immigrant poor – demonstrated by her shift from hospital work to working within a specified district of West Central London. Thus despite Marcella's struggles to live within the community of Mellor, once in London she is depicted as seeking to replicate the values of the local, even to the extent of transporting Minta Hurd and her children to live alongside her in the city with a communicating door between their apartments in a model tenement building. As with her stay in Mellor however, Marcella remains unable to truly know the people that she lives amongst, as she continues to impose a narrative upon Minta that the woman shrinks from:

Marcella's fixed mode of conceiving her and her story caused her from the beginning of their fresh acquaintance a dumb irritation and trouble she could never have explained. It was so tragic, reflective, exacting. It seemed to ask of her feelings that she could not have, to expect from her expression that was impossible. And it stood also between her and the friends and distractions that she would like to have.

[...]

Meanwhile Marcella had expected her with emotion, and had meant through this experiment to bring herself truly near to the poor. [...] But the relation jarred and limped perpetually, and Marcella wistfully thought it her fault.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 349-50.

Marcella's jarring relationship with Minta echoes her mixed success as a London district nurse. While Sanders is correct in asserting that Ward 'wants [Marcella] trained to be a better landowner's wife and leader of society, not to choose a lifelong career as an independent woman working among the London slums', Marcella's eventual relinquishment of her nursing duties does not represent Ward's antipathy towards women working in such roles in their communities – indeed, 'An Appeal Against Female Suffrage' illustrates the author's strong support for women's involvement as independent professionals in their neighbourhoods.⁷⁵ Rather, Marcella's patchy career as a nurse indicates Ward's reservations over whether London can be transformed into a series of parochial spheres to be known and guided by members of the upper classes. These reservations are made plain in two seemingly contrasting visits made by Marcella to two different patients. The first sees Marcella caring for 'a young Jewess [...] in a state of raging delirium'.⁷⁶ From Marcella's professional viewpoint, much of the woman's suffering can be attributed to the 'criminal neglect and mismanagement' of the doctor, and this view is corroborated when the doctor arrives and is obviously drunk.⁷⁷ Marcella's authoritative dismissal of 'Doctor Blank' – 'I think [...] you had better leave it to me – and – go away!' – as well as her claiming of the sickroom as her special sphere of influence – 'I know my place!' – appears to imply that the districts of London can be known and ruled by middle and upper-class women with ease, and thus the city can be successfully transformed into a series of communal spaces.⁷⁸ And yet even as

⁷⁵ Sanders, *Eve's Renegades*, p. 82.

⁷⁶ Ward, *Marcella*, p. 341.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p. 342.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p. 344.

Marcella protects her patient and proclaims her authority, the young Jewess remains an enigma to her, along with her Jewish neighbours. Although Marcella fails to appreciate the individuality of the poor of Mellor, in London, the narrator does not even attempt to distinguish individuals within the immigrant poor, as if to illustrate the impossibility of achieving the sort of community found in rural England. The crude stereotypes used to describe the group of poor Jews thus undercut any sense of a connection that Marcella achieves with her urban environment, as London remains a foreign and unknowable space for the female philanthropist:

Marcella stood in the doorway and watched the scene; the gradual disappearance of the helpless form on the stretcher, with its fevered face under the dark mat of hair [...] the crowd of Jewesses on the stairs and landing, craning their necks, gesticulating and talking [...] the big husband, following the form of his departing and unconscious wife with his eyes, his face convulsed with weeping, the whimpering children clinging about his knees.

How hot it was! – how stifling the staircase smelt, and how the sun beat down from that upper window and on the towzled unkempt women with their large-eyed children!⁷⁹

The doubts that inform Marcella's visit to the Jewish mother are then brought to the fore when Marcella visits a different building in her district and finds herself defending a woman from her violent, drunken husband. In the struggle Marcella is badly injured and the woman is almost killed: 'she sank down on the floor again beside her patient, gazing at the woman's marred face – indescribably patient in its deep unconsciousness – at the gnarled and bloodstained hands, with their wedding-ring; at the thin locks of torn grey hair – with tears that ran unheeded down her cheeks, in a passion of anguished pity'.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p. 347.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p. 419.

Marcella's left arm has been dislocated and left 'disabled by her side' by the 'great – powerful brute', a 'wild beast in human shape'.⁸¹ This violent rejection of Marcella and her nursing skills, as well as the dehumanised image of Marcella's attacker, again denies the possibility of transforming the metropolis into a parochial space, as its inhabitants remain violent, dangerous and ultimately unknowable. Marcella has to be rescued by two unnamed men, and indeed, her whole visit as a professional nurse is framed by the visit of a *male* professional to the area – the now MP Aldous Raeburn, who is investigating the workshops of the district. Although Marcella had earlier successfully evicted the incompetent Doctor Blank from the neighbourhood, now it is her turn to be taken away in a cab by Aldous, who asks himself,

Was this what her new career- her enthusiasms – meant, or might mean! Twenty-three! – in the prime of youth, of charm! Horrible, unpardonable waste! [...] He himself may be morally 'ever a fighter,' and feel the glow, the stern joy of the fight. But she! – let her leave the human brute and his unsavoury struggle alone! It cannot be borne – it was never meant – that she should dip her delicate wings, of her own free will at least, in such a mire of blood and tears.⁸²

Although Marcella does stay in London for some time after the attack, in many ways this scene anticipates her eventual return to rural England as the new mistress of Mellor Park. The assault on Marcella whilst in her role as district nurse, coupled with Aldous' horror at her career in London's slums, would seem to suggest that her return to the parochial world of the countryside should be viewed as a retreat, both on Marcella and Ward's part, from the overwhelming demands of the modern city. Yet connected to the failure of the district nurse

⁸¹ *Ibid*, p. 418; p. 419; p. 418.

⁸² *Ibid*, p. 421.

project is the argument that social change is best promoted in rural communities, where individuals from all classes are tied and bonded together, than in the vast and alien city. At once the symbol of England's past, the big house is also represented here as the generator of a better future. As Sanders notes, Marcella's work in London 'teaches her to value the work of rural landlords in housing the poor, while in the city, with no one to care about them, the slum-dwellers struggle with far worse conditions'.⁸³ Thus Marcella's return home is equally concerned with shifting the novel's focus back to the most effective sphere of social action for women, as with restricting Marcella's burgeoning existence as a professional, urban heroine.

The shift from England's urban centre back to rural life on the margins, which occurs between Book Three and Book Four of *Marcella*, is also anticipated by Marcella's visit to Parliament as a guest of Wharton, which emphasises once and for all, the importance of women remaining in the parochial sphere. For Marcella this visit is a culmination of all her childhood fantasies about her great-uncle the Speaker, as well as her more adult attraction to public speakers such as Wharton. Her excitement is plainly evident, as she bombards Wharton with questions: 'Oh! now, come and tell us everything – and who everybody is. Why don't we see the Speaker? – and which is the Government side? – Oh yes, I see. And who's this speaking now?' These excited questions also reveal Marcella's ignorance however, which is underlined by Wharton's teasing response that plays on Marcella's arrogance, 'Why, I thought you knew everything [...] How shall I instruct a Speaker's great-niece?' While Marcella proclaims impatiently, 'Why, of course I feel as if the place belonged to me!' her

⁸³ Sanders, *Eve's Renegades*, p. 82.

questions and reaction to the ensuing political debate give the lie to this statement.⁸⁴

Indeed, even the location of the scene undermines Marcella's claiming of Parliament, as she is watching events from the Ladies' Gallery, which with its grating and position above the political action, makes literal women's division from the parliamentary sphere. Marcella may claim the House of Commons as her own by rights of ancestry, but unlike Mellor Park, Parliament is not hers to inherit. As Kathryn Gleadle notes, when discussing the 'ventilator space' that preceded the Ladies' Gallery as the space where women watched political debates before the fire of 1834 that destroyed the original House of Commons, 'Women's experience of the ventilator space exemplified the "paradoxical geography" they experienced. It was a positioning which construed them as both central (by dint of their privileged access to the country's senate) yet simultaneously marginal. Women's habituation to experiencing parliamentary debates through this inhibiting architectural space required them to rehearse bodily their gendered exclusion.'⁸⁵ A similar process can be seen to be taking place in *Marcella* in the parliament scenes, as Ward places her heroine in a space that emphasises her borderline relationship to the public sphere, despite Marcella's belief otherwise. The 'paradoxical geography' of the Ladies' Gallery is central to Ward's vision of women's parochial form of citizenship, and as Ward traces her heroine's response to the government debate she urges a

⁸⁴ Ward, *Marcella*, p. 389.

⁸⁵ Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens*, p. 58.

continuance of women's 'central [...] yet simultaneously marginal' relationship with the public sphere.⁸⁶

Crucially, as Marcella's eager questions to Wharton demonstrate, she is unable to interpret the scene before her. Marcella's behaviour justifies the concerns of 'An Appeal Against Female Suffrage' that women's direct participation in party politics would see them becoming 'hotter partisans than men' due to their 'natural eagerness and quickness of temper', as Marcella's support for Wharton's speech is clearly informed by her emotions rather than by rational thought.⁸⁷ As Marcella listens to Wharton, she feels and sees with him – 'it was as though she had passed into Wharton's place, was seeing with his eyes, feeling with his nerves'.⁸⁸ Yet while such 'feminine' sympathy is a strength in the local community, in parliament it transforms Marcella into an unintelligent listener, as her support for Wharton sees her reject all opposition without question: "'How can one listen to anything else!'" she said; and for a long time she sat staring at the House without hearing a word of what the very competent, caustic, and well-informed manufacturer on the Government side was saying.' Although Marcella has a moment of 'intellectual dissent' from Wharton's speech, this independence is quickly lost under 'the general impression which the speech had left upon her – in this warm quickening of the pulses, this romantic interest in the figure, the scene, the young emerging personality.'⁸⁹

For Marcella, the whole of the House of Commons – the 'power' of 'the central machine' – is clouded by her feelings, even to the extent of seeing the

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 58.

⁸⁷ Ward and Creighton, p. 783.

⁸⁸ Ward, *Marcella*, p. 393.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p. 394.

speeches given by Wharton and Aldous as yet another battle for her love: ‘The two men upon whom her life had so far turned were once more in presence of, pitted against, each other – and she, once more, looking on!’⁹⁰ Whilst Marcella appears to feel a position of power over the two MPs here, the contrast between her emotions and their rationality in fact further reinforces her divide from the ‘central machine’. As Sanders notes, while ‘Aldous Raeburn and Harry Wharton are absorbed in their public and political lives, Marcella, like a century of Victorian heroines before her, lives in the world of her own feelings’.⁹¹ Nonetheless, although Sanders is correct in stating that Ward demonstrates that Marcella ‘will never be any use politically’, Ward also reveals a more complex vision of the men in parliament, as Wharton succumbs to a bribe and sacrifices his radical principles, and Aldous Raeburn struggles throughout the novel to find answers to the pressing social issues of the day.⁹² Life and work in government is not clear cut or easy for men either in *Marcella*, and as Ward offers a celebratory – yet conflicted – image of the House of Commons, the narrative looks to the parochial sphere for greater certainty:

Here are the men who, both by their qualities and their defects, are to have for their span of life the leading – or the wrecking? – of this great fate-bearing force, this ‘weary Titan’ we call our country. Here things are not only debated, but done – lamely or badly, perhaps, but still *done* – which will affect our children’s children; which link us to the Past; which carry us on safely or dangerously to a Future only the Gods know.⁹³

The final book of *Marcella* is marked by the deaths of Aldous Raeburn’s grandfather and Marcella’s father, which see Aldous and Marcella inherit their

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 392; p. 396.

⁹¹ Sanders, *Eve’s Renegades*, p. 81.

⁹² *Ibid*, p. 81.

⁹³ Ward, *Marcella*, p. 392-93.

respective country estates: Maxwell Court and Mellor Park. Whereas Marcella had played at Lady Bountiful during her first stay in Mellor, now as the mistress of her family property, she maintains this position of power for real. With her difficult father dead, Marcella looks to heal the emotional breach between herself and her mother, and although her mother refuses to live with her daughter at Mellor throughout the year, Mrs. Boyce gives her daughter some of the maternal affection she has lacked for most of her life: ‘for the first time, she let Marcella put her on the sofa, tend her, and read to her. More wonderful still, she went to sleep while Marcella was reading.’⁹⁴ Indeed, although Marcella struggles at first to understand her mother’s desire to live apart, this solution in fact enables the daughter to develop a healthy relationship with the mother that for so long viewed her from an ironic distance, as well as develop into a mother herself, as the maternal landowner of Mellor. In the final stages of *Marcella* therefore, we see the heroine understand and employ the power of social maternalism in her community.

Marcella’s newfound commitment to social maternalism after her troubles in London and improved relationship with her own mother can be seen in her plans for Mellor Park, which she describes to Aldous:

I don’t think altogether what I used to think. I mean to keep up this house – to make it beautiful, to hand it on, perhaps *more* beautiful than I found it, to those that come after. And I mean to maintain enough service in it both to keep it in order and to make it a social centre for all people about – for everybody of all classes, so far as I can. I want it to be a place of amusement and delight and talk to us all – especially to the very poor. After all [...] *everybody* on the estate, in their different degree, has contributed to this house, in some sense, for generations. I want it to

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 507-508.

come into their lives – to make it *their* possession, *their* pride, - as well as mine.⁹⁵

As Sutton-Ramspeck notes, Marcella's plans for her estate illustrate 'the generally optimistic tenor of [Ward's] portrayal of relations between homes and the public realm: she suggests not only that private efforts can improve the public sphere but also that it is possible to balance beauty and usefulness in spaces that bring together the private and the public'. For Sutton-Ramspeck, such scenes indicate the significance of 'the house beautiful' to *Marcella*, as well as Ward's fiction in general.⁹⁶ Yet in regarding the reformed Mellor Park simply as a space that brings together 'the private and the public', Sutton-Ramspeck misses the *local* aspect of Marcella's social vision, as her family estate is transformed into the central space of the communal sphere. While Marcella has moved away from her socialist convictions, she sees her house as the shared property of the community, and through the beauty of her home she seeks to foster a greater sense of belonging and connection between the rich and poor of England. In Marcella's hands, Mellor Park is part of the country's history but she also aims to make it central to the country's future, as she sketches out to Aldous the social experiments she plans to make on her estate: 'we find that an average weekly increase of five shillings per head – which would give the men of full age and in full work about a pound a week – would work out at about two thousand a year'.⁹⁷

Despite Marcella's previous railing against Aldous' cautious approach to social improvements, she too, is now sensitive to the demands of the local

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 522.

⁹⁶ Sutton-Ramspeck, p. 127; p. 129.

⁹⁷ Ward, *Marcella*, p. 522.

community – such as the farmers who will have provide these wage increases – and promotes the methods of gradual, conservative reform: ‘it may turn out a mistake. But - whatever happens – whatever any of us, Socialists or not, may hope for in the future – here one *is* with one’s conscience, and one’s money, and these people, who like oneself have but the one life!’⁹⁸ Marcella’s commitment to conservative reform is then further underlined by her humble and uncertain request of Aldous for his thoughts on her project, where previously she constantly defied him. As Sutton-Ramspeck and Meller, and also Lewis have commented, Aldous Raeburn represents the intellectual and political middle ground of *Marcella*, where the public and the private, the rich and the poor, the past and the future, and ‘individualist paternalism and thorough going collectivism’ all meet in the present-day, parochial sphere.⁹⁹ Marcella’s changed appreciation of her former fiancé and his politics thus symbolises her greater appreciation of gradual social reform.

Likewise, Marcella’s new humility with Aldous reveals not so much Marcella’s infantilisation at the end of the novel as Sanders claims, but her rejection of overt power and the public sphere in favour of cautious influence exercised judiciously in the local community. Crucially, Sanders’ interpretation of the reunion between Marcella and Aldous at the novel’s conclusion as the taming and humbling of Marcella and the elevation of Aldous to ‘god-like’ status, neglects the balance between the lovers, as Aldous resists any sense of Marcella’s inferiority: ‘Does a man *forgive* the hand that sets him free, the voice

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 523.

⁹⁹ Jane Lewis, p. 209; see also Sutton-Ramspeck and Meller, p. 23.

that recreates him? Choose some better word – my wife!’¹⁰⁰ For Sanders, women are shown to be ‘incomplete without steady male guidance’ in Ward’s novels, but the same can also be said about the men of *Marcella*, who are seen to depend upon female sympathy.¹⁰¹ While it is only Aldous as a member of the House of Commons who can access the central machine of government, his participation is complemented by Marcella’s own form of citizenship – her involvement and influence in the community. Marcella’s parochial influence is therefore very much the borderline citizenship that Gleadle identifies as central to the female political experience of the nineteenth century, and yet in the world of Mrs. Humphry Ward, female participation on the parochial borders of the country offers its own unique powers and opportunities.

Mrs. Humphry Ward

Sir George Tressady (1896)

The confident image of Marcella’s commitment to the parochial sphere is undermined however, by the sequel to *Marcella*, *Sir George Tressady*, which was published two years later. While Ward’s biographer John Sutherland offers convincing financial reasons behind Ward’s decision to continue the story of Marcella into her marriage and motherhood, Ward’s return to her heroine also reveals lingering uncertainties behind her vision of women’s parochial citizenship.¹⁰² As the story opens in the social circles of Sir George Tressady

¹⁰⁰ Sanders, *Eve’s Renegades*, p. 83; Ward, *Marcella*, p. 543.

¹⁰¹ Sanders, *Eve’s Renegades*, p. 200.

¹⁰² See John Sutherland, pp. 149-52.

(one of Aldous' political opponents), Marcella – now Lady Maxwell - is seen to have acquired a reputation for political meddling – at least amongst her enemies:

'That *woman!*' said Mrs. Watton with ponderous force, throwing up her hands as she spoke. Then she turned to Lord Fontenoy. 'Don't *you* regard her as the source of half the mischievous work done by this precious Government in the last two years?' she asked him imperiously. A half-contemptuous smile crossed Lord Fontenoy's worn face. 'Well, really, I'm not inclined to make Lady Maxwell the scapegoat. Let them bear their own misdeeds.'

[...]

'Plenty of English Cabinet Ministers have been led by women before now,' she said drily; 'and no blame to them or anybody else. Only in the old days you knew where you were. Women were corrupt – as they were meant to be – for their husbands and brothers and sons. They wanted something for somebody – and got it. Now they are corrupt – like Lady Maxwell – for what they are pleased to call "causes", and it is that which will take the nation to ruin.'¹⁰³

Significantly, what disturbs Mrs. Watton most about Marcella is not her apparently strong political influence, but what Marcella uses her influence for. Mrs. Watton's traditional understanding of political women as 'corrupt [...]' for their husbands and brothers and sons' supports Kathryn Gleadle's argument that nineteenth-century politicians 'were fully accustomed to drawing upon the politicking skills of aristocratic women' for their own campaigns, and yet Marcella seems to have moved away from this tradition of working for her husband to exploiting Aldous' position in government to promote her own political beliefs and causes.¹⁰⁴ While ironically, Marcella's influence is therefore less corrupt than Mrs. Watton's system as it is not motivated by nepotism, and would seem to gesture back to Ward and Creighton's vision of women's moral disinterestedness in the Appeal, it is actually far more dangerous, since Marcella is clearly attempting to build on her borderline place in the nation's government

¹⁰³ Ward, *Sir George Tressady*, pp. 22-23.

¹⁰⁴ Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens*, p. 161.

to empower both herself and her visions for improving society. While *Marcella* revealed the important work to be done by its heroine in the parochial sphere, in *Sir George Tressady* it is crucial that Marcella spends much of her time away from Maxwell Court in favour of her London homes – one in the East End and one in St. James' Square – and even more notably, away from her son Hallin, despite Ward's constant insistence on Marcella's love for motherhood. Ward's sequel to *Marcella* anxiously probes the idea of women's parochial citizenship and comes close to implying that maternity and an active life in the local community – the central thesis for many nineteenth-century women writers – might not be enough for intelligent and passionate women like Marcella.

Nonetheless, almost as soon as *Sir George Tressady* raises questions about women's work in the parochial sphere, these questions are lost as the narrative continuously seeks to criticise political women. Mrs. Watton's attack on Marcella is substantiated by the story of Marcella's friend Betty Leven, who has forced her husband Frank into politics and is putting the happiness of their marriage at risk. Marcella's growing realisation of the problems connected to her involvement in politics is matched by Betty's reluctant understanding that Frank is not the politician she wishes him to be, and nor should she, the narrator asserts, wish to change him: 'The young wife, with many sighs, had laid down all dreams of a husband on the front bench. But – in compensation – she had regained her lover, and the honeymoon shone once more.'¹⁰⁵ Such an easy resolution of female political ambition is not to be found in Marcella's story however, as Ward uses her heroine's attempt at speech making on behalf of her and husband's campaign for factory workers to underline the unsuitability of women in politics.

¹⁰⁵ Ward, *Sir George Tressady*, p. 484.

Crucially, while Marcella's voice and manner are represented in *Marcella* and *Sir George Tressady* as two of her strongest assets, once upon a platform in front of the 'familiar types' of East London, the power of both of these is denied to her, as Ward maintains the distinction between parochial and public spheres. The admiring George Tressady is horrified to witness Marcella's public mortification:

What was happening? She had once told him that she was not a speaker, and he had not believed her. She had begun well, he thought, though with a hesitation he had not expected. But now – had she lost her thread – or what? Incredible! when one remembered her in private life, in conversation. Yet these stumbling sentences, this evident distress!
 [...]
 A little more, and she would have lost her audience. She *had* lost it. [...]
 They were only staring at her because she was handsome and a great lady.
 [...]
 Amazing! How *could* her personal magic – so famous on so many fields – have deserted her life this in an East End schoolroom, before people whose lives she knew, whose griefs she carried in her heart?¹⁰⁶

As Tressady strives to understand the reasons behind his heroine's dramatic failure, he comes to the sudden realisation that Marcella is repeating her husband's 'coming speech in the House of Lords' to her East End audience. In front of her own people's parliament however, and unlike her husband, Marcella is an unsuccessful politician – offering a 'strange conversion of all that was manly, solid, and effective in Maxwell, into a confused mass of facts and figures, pedantic, colourless, and cold!' Indeed, Marcella's only moment of power over her audience is when she moves away from the rational and 'manly' speech of her husband to 'words of personal reminiscence and experience'. Yet even as Marcella's 'last few sentences' appear to bring her talk to a successful close, it is evident that they have only had an impact on Tressady: 'for one listener there

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 313.

they changed everything.’ Moreover, the impact they have had is a romantic – even erotic – one, as Tressady feels with Marcella, and seeks to express his own tortured love for her: ‘Is it starved tailoresses and shirtmakers alone who suffer? Is there no hunger of the heart, that matches and overweighs the physical? Is it not as easy for the rich as the poor to miss the one thing needful, the one thing that matters and saves?’ Just like the poor who stare at Marcella on the platform ‘because she was handsome and a great lady’, Tressady is only affected by Marcella’s speech because he is in love with her. The female power displayed by Marcella in the last moments of her speech is hence only the power to arouse emotion, and is ultimately, rooted in the heroine’s sexuality.¹⁰⁷

For Ward, Marcella’s sexual power demonstrates why women are unfitted to active political life. As Lewis notes, ‘while Marcella effectively, albeit unconsciously, uses feminine wiles to worthy political ends, her sex and sexuality prove a problem’ for her author, and this problem is literalised by Ward with the attack upon Marcella after her speech has finished.¹⁰⁸ In a scene reminiscent of Margaret Hale’s intervention in the riot of Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South*, Marcella is hit by a stone thrown from the crowd, which has turned violent: ‘He looked at her in despair. The handkerchief, and the delicate hand itself that she was holding to her brow, were dabbled in blood.’¹⁰⁹ Both assaults on Margaret Hale in *North and South* and on Marcella in *Sir George Tressady* can be seen to illustrate the authors’ anxieties about women speaking and working in public, and yet different to Margaret’s speech and intervention in Gaskell’s novel which at least protects John Thornton from his rioting workers,

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 314-315.

¹⁰⁸ Jane Lewis, p. 246.

¹⁰⁹ Ward, *Sir George Tressady*, p. 317. Gaskell, *North and South*, p. 179.

the entirety of Marcella's public effort for her husband is damned as a failure by Ward, thereby suggesting Ward's fiercer sense of distinction between female work in the public and in the parochial spheres. As Marcella recovers from her wound, she sees that her moment as a 'platform woman' has only harmed her husband's cause, and furthermore, was motivated more from her own ego than her sympathetic nature. Marcella's regrets confirm Ward and Creighton's worst fears about political women: 'Oh! what a failure – what a failure! I am afraid I have done Aldous harm! [...] Oh! it was all a mistake – all a great mistake! I suppose I imagined – that is one's folly – that I could really do some good – make an effect.'¹¹⁰

Marcella's damage to Aldous' political career is not confined to her failed speech however. At a crucial moment in the debates over Aldous' factory bill, Tressady switches his vote from the opposition and gives a speech in favour of Aldous' campaign. While at first this speech is understood solely as a political event, it is soon recognised as prompted by the close relationship between Tressady and Marcella, and the influence Marcella maintains over her male friend. As O'Cinneide comments, Marcella's 'use of her personal influence' has generated 'a disturbing confusion between political and sexual intent'.¹¹¹ Indeed, as Tressady warned Marcella in the early days of their acquaintance when they were still political opponents, 'You know, nobody is ever converted – politically – nowadays', and this warning comes back to haunt Marcella once it is clear what her friend is about to do.¹¹² Marcella's sexuality is represented by Ward as a great 'power' but also a 'responsibility' and in exerting her influence over

¹¹⁰ Ward, *Sir George Tressady*, pp. 317-19.

¹¹¹ O'Cinneide, p. 160.

¹¹² Ward, *Sir George Tressady*, p. 237.

Tressady without much thought, she is shown to cause chaos in parliament.¹¹³ At the moment of Tressady's conversion, women's political power has moved dangerously toward the centre ground, as Tressady's former partner in opposition, Lord Fontenoy, looks 'up markedly and deliberately at the Ladies' Gallery' as the votes for the bill are cast.¹¹⁴ Soon rumours are circulating around Westminster that Aldous owes 'his political salvation to his wife's charm', and Marcella is discussed as a 'political coquette': '*I'm not one of your great political ladies, who pretend to know everything that may keep men dangling after them.*'¹¹⁵

Marcella then has to face the humiliation of Tressady confessing his love for her, followed by her own confession to her husband of her mistakes. Throughout both these scenes the message is clear – women and public politics are a dangerous mix: 'I have done very ill – very, *very* ill. I have been thinking all through of my personal want, - of personal victory.' As Marcella faces the recognition that, she has made 'all [Aldous'] work, and all [his] triumph, gall and bitterness', both husband and wife return to their estate in Brookshire to repair the damage.¹¹⁶ Yet while Jane Lewis has described this decision as Marcella's 'retreat to the private sphere', this is evidently not the case as we soon see Marcella immersed in her local work and responsibilities as a landowner again: 'Have you found out that she treats her servants like hospital nurses; that they go off and on duty at stated hours; that she had workshops and art schools for them

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 435.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 408.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 430; p. 414.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 426-27; p. 448.

in the back premises'.¹¹⁷ Rather than reading the conclusion of Marcella's story in *Sir George Tressady* as a shift from public to private, it should be understood instead as a shift from public to parochial – a shift that therefore upholds the message of *Marcella* and 'An Appeal Against Female Suffrage'. Nonetheless, Marcella's dalliance in the political sphere for much of the narrative points to Ward's sense of growing instabilities within her model of parochial citizenship for the late Victorian woman.

As Mrs. Humphry Ward's *Marcella* and *Sir George Tressady* indicate, the relationship between the gentlewoman and parochial space retained potency into both the literature and politics of the 1890s. While the narratives of female conservative reform and maternalist philanthropy endure and adapt to the demands of the *fin-de-siècle*, Ward's 'Appeal Against Female Suffrage' also introduces the world of local politics into the conception of the gentlewoman's role in the parochial sphere, and appears to hold her vision of a masculine parliamentary politics and a female local politics in a complimentary balance. Nonetheless what Ward depicted as complimentary, pro-suffrage campaigners saw only as contradiction, and the struggles Marcella Maxwell undergoes in *Sir George Tressady*, as well as her attraction to Harry Wharton in *Marcella* insinuates the limitations of Ward's advocacy of female parochial citizenship. Both the Maxwell marriage and the parochial sphere remain intact at the end of Ward's 'Marcella' novels. Yet the tensions within both suggest problems in the borderlands of Mrs. Humphry Ward's social vision - problems which were not seen earlier in the century.

¹¹⁷ Jane Lewis, p. 246; Ward, *Sir George Tressady*, p. 486.

Conclusion

Two Views of *Shirley*

Mary Ward was a lifelong fan of Charlotte and Emily Brontë. Ever since her Aunt Fan had given the young Mary Arnold a copy of Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* in 1868, she had been an enthusiast in particular, of the novels of Charlotte. In the years 1899-90 Smith, Elder and Co. – Brontë and Ward's shared publisher - brought out a 'deluxe collective reissue' of the Brontës' works, which also included Gaskell's biography, entitled the 'Haworth Edition'.¹ Appropriately, it was Ward who George Smith invited to write new introductions for the Brontë novels, and as Ward's biographer John Sutherland maintains, they 'were the best sustained critical prose that she ever wrote' – true to form, Ward signed these pieces as by 'Mary A. Ward' and not by 'Mrs. Humphry'.² Nonetheless, while Ward was full of praise for Brontë's *Villette* – asserting its 'unwavering power and mastery' – her introduction to *Shirley* was far more reserved in its admiration. Significant to the focus of this study, Ward describes the many pages devoted to the curates, the old maids and *Shirley*'s philanthropy as 'long', 'clumsy' and full of 'Commonplaces writ large'. For Ward, the only value of *Shirley* is in its 'real and abiding interest for the student of English manners' and yet even as Ward makes this claim, she notes that while 'this clerical, middle-class, country life was intimately known to Charlotte Brontë', it 'was not *her* subject in literature'. The world of rural England and its communities was better left to Jane Austen, *Middlemarch*, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, Mrs. Gaskell and to 'half the eminent and most of the readable novels of

¹ John Sutherland, p. 231.

² *Ibid*, p. 231.

English life' (she might well have been tempted to add 'the novels of Mrs. Humphry Ward' here).³ In writing the introduction to the Haworth edition of *Shirley*, Ward was able to pit her own talents against those of her literary idol and emerge triumphant – offering constructive (if somewhat one-way) criticism to Brontë in her own area of expertise, English country life. What Ward's introduction also reveals however, is her mode of reading *Shirley* solely through the lens of rural community, Englishness, and the clergy.

One year after Ward's review of *Shirley*, Charlotte Brontë's novel was also discussed by the social investigator Clara Collet in her essay 'Through Fifty Years: The Economic Progress of Women', printed in Collet's 1902 essay collection, *Educated Working Women: Essays on the Economic Position of Women Workers in the Middle Classes*. Born only nine years later than Ward in 1860, Collet nonetheless appears to have belonged to a very different generation to the author and anti-suffrage campaigner. After working briefly as a teacher in Leicester, Collet moved to London and worked as a researcher on Charles Booth's monumental survey of urban poverty *Life and Labour of the People of London*, and later became one of the first women to work for the Civil Service in the Board of Trade. Vastly different to Ward's study of *Shirley*, Collet's essay uses Caroline Helstone's impassioned plea for employment in Brontë's chapter 'Two Lives' to demonstrate the progress in female education and employment over the years since *Shirley*'s publication in 1849. Collet confidently asserts that in 1900, 'no middle-class woman of average intelligence, educated in the high schools established during the last twenty-five years, is unable to earn a living if

³ Mary A. Ward, 'Introduction', in *Shirley*, Charlotte Brontë, (London: Smith Elder and Co., 1899; repr. London: John Murray, 1924), pp. xi-xxviii, (p. xviii-xxi).

she chooses to do so', and that unlike the past, women feel little pressure to marry for money, and moreover, 'the work which educated women are paid to do is in the main useful and satisfying'. No longer having to act as 'useful companions to useless women', nor having to 'spend their time in imperfectly imparting valueless facts in the schoolroom', from the perspective of Collet at the dawn of the twentieth century, women's situation had improved immensely since the days of Charlotte Brontë and her oppressed, struggling heroines.⁴

When these contemporary readings of *Shirley* are read alongside each other, Clara Collet's essay underlines the difficulties Mrs. Humphry Ward's brand of female parochial citizenship faced at the turn of the century. Rather than being read as a failed example of English country and clerical life, for women other than Ward *Shirley* indicated how far female economic emancipation had come over the past five decades, and more worryingly, the novel also appeared to urge greater progress, as Collet quoted from Brontë's novel to insist upon her vision of professionalised, single, urban women for *all* the classes: 'We are constantly congratulating ourselves that our middle-aged spinsters have nothing in common with the old maid of the past, while we assume that the next half-century will see a still greater exaltation of the maiden lady. I doubt it very much, unless much more thought and effort are given to making the duller girls industrially competent.'⁵ Indeed, issues with Collet's reductive vision of industrial competency for 'the duller girls' aside, Collet's career further reveals

⁴ Clara Collet, 'Through Fifty Years: The Economic Progress of Women', in *Educated Working Women: Essays on the Economic Position of Women Workers in the Middle Classes*, (London: P. S. King and Son, 1902), pp. 134-43, (pp. 137-39). To read more about Clara Collet and her work as a social investigator see Gabrielle Mearns, "'Long Trudges through Whitechapel': The East End of Beatrice Webb's and Clara Collet's Social Investigations', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, No. 13 (2011). Available at <http://19.bbk.ac.uk/index.php/19/article/view/634>

⁵ Collet, p. 142.

the problematic relationship the novels and politics of Mrs. Humphry Ward maintained with her contemporaries. From the position of the modern, professional Clara Collet, Ward's image of the landed, philanthropic Marcella Boyce/Lady Maxwell must have risked Ward being rendered as out of touch with the times as Charlotte Yonge was seen to be only a decade before.

This sense of the old fashioned nature of Mrs. Humphry Ward's social vision is further supported by the decline of her sales in the twentieth century, with only the American markets responding well (and not for much longer than Ward's English readership) to Ward's images of aristocrats, landed estates and the ways of rural England. Virginia Woolf, in particular, seems to have detested Mrs. Humphry Ward and have regarded her novels as the lowest form of literature. After reading Ward's novel *Eltham House* in 1915, Woolf wrote to Lady Robert Cecil,

By the way, I've just read *Eltham House*, by that mangy old hack; and I wonder what you'd say to it. It seems to me the writing of a woman who has been accidentally locked in to the housekeeper's room of Longleat say for the past 20 years; and has done nothing but absorb family portraits and family plate. According to her, 12 people, all related, rule England. But its [sic] a vile book, and after gulping it down, I felt morally debased. My nurse, however, is absorbed by it.⁶

Viewed historically, the fall of the once unassailable Mrs. Humphry Ward is understandable, as the twentieth century saw a series of political changes that diminished the power of Ward's beloved local politics in favour of a central state machine. As Julia Bush acknowledges in *Women Against the Vote*,

⁶ Virginia Woolf, 'To Lady Robert Cecil, 25 October 1915', in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. II: 1912-1922, The Question of Things Happening*, ed. by Nigel Nicolson, (London: Hogarth Press, 1976), pp. 68-69, (p. 68).

During the late nineteenth century it was by no means obvious that local government would become more and more yoked to parliamentary decision-making, and less and less dependent upon the voluntary social service provided by middle-class and upper-class women. The early twentieth century proved a turning point in this respect, as the Liberal government's social reform programme was followed by an onslaught of centralising wartime bureaucracy. But the anti-suffrage proponents of 'womanly' local government lacked the benefit of historical hindsight as they tried to remain true to their long-established faith in women's gendered citizenship.⁷

From this perspective therefore, the empowered vision of the gentlewoman in her parochial sphere that was popularised by Hannah More and pervaded women's writing throughout the nineteenth century died out with Mrs. Humphry Ward's declining sales at the turn of the twentieth. In a profound sense, the parochial no longer existed as it had done so one hundred years earlier. As motorcars, telegrams and the telephone transformed the local into the universal, the next generation of female readers and writers 'found new heroines and new inspirations', and cast women like Ward 'into the wilderness'.⁸ Parochial, non-urban spaces were significant only to the nineteenth-century woman writer.

Thus put, the argument for the importance of the parochial realm solely to the nineteenth-century female author appears convincing, as both history and a cursory sweep over twentieth-century women's writing seem to confirm the preference of the metropolitan over the rural, and the centralised state over local government. The publication of Winifred Holtby's *South Riding* in 1936 calls these claims into question however. Holtby's novel returns us close to the geography of *Shirley* – Yorkshire – and with it the reader is immersed again in a parochial sphere informed 'by a world of acquaintances, kin, friends, enemies,

⁷ Bush, p. 16.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 5.

and so forth, with whom one shares a culture and a history'.⁹ The sphere of local politics that Mary Ward was so fond of takes centre stage again, as Holtby ironically describes the machinations and processes of the South Riding County Council, which is guided by the popular Alderman Mrs. Bellows – 'She was a portent; she was a mascot; she was the first woman alderman in South Riding'.¹⁰

As with the communities of the nineteenth-century novels of this thesis, the future of South Riding is bitterly contested by its rival communal leaders, one of whom is Sarah Burton – a South Riding native who has returned home after living in South Africa and London to rule Kiplington High School as its new headmistress. Sarah – like Rachel Curtis and Marcella Boyce before her – battles with those she regards as representative of the old order, and equally familiarly to those acquainted with the plots of Victorian novels, she falls in love with her arch enemy Robert Carne of Maythorpe Hall, who stands for the landed and hereditary privilege Sarah seeks to overturn in her community. Crucially, Sarah is no female philanthropist in the traditional sense, and she is seen to struggle with a maternal identity throughout the book, but her concern for Lydia Holly, the intelligent girl from the local slum is one of the central themes of Holtby's novel. Moreover, as schoolmistress, Sarah in fact returns to the role of teacher first seen in this study with Hannah More and her Sunday schools, and upheld throughout the nineteenth century via the texts of *Shirley*, *My Lady Ludlow* and *The Clever Woman of the Family*, as well as via the reforms in women's education celebrated (in different ways) by both Mrs. Humphry Ward and Clara Collet. Sarah's epiphany of community at *South Riding's* conclusion is thus both

⁹ Lofland, p. 9.

¹⁰ Winifred Holtby, *South Riding*, (London: Collins and Co., 1936; repr. London: Virago Press, 2011), p. 6.

rooted in her left-wing collective politics, but also in her literary inheritance as the successor of the nineteenth-century philanthropic heroine's social vision:

She was one with the people round her, who had suffered shame, illness, bereavement, grief and fear. She belonged to them. Those things which were done for them – that battle against poverty, madness, sickness and old age, the battle which Mrs. Beddows had called local government – was fought for her as well. She was not outside it. What she had taken from life, they all had paid for. What she had still to give, was not her gift alone. She was in debt, to life and to these people; and she knew that she could repay no loan unaided.¹¹

As Sarah looks around for strength, she finds it in the figure of Mrs.

Beddows – seventy-two years old, 'dignified' but with eyes like a spaniel – and the narrative's gaze closes with this focus on the central maternal figure of the South Riding community: 'all [Sarah's] new-found understanding of and love for the South Riding gathered up in her feeling for that small sturdy figure.'¹²

Holtby's representation of the parochial sphere as a maternal space thus returns us to the maternalism of Hannah More and her Victorian female successors, and underlines the enduring potency of the local and the rural in the social vision of female narratives. While Winifred Holtby's *South Riding* may be something of an anomaly in twentieth-century women's fiction for its emphasis on the heroine's relationship with the communal sphere, its blurring of maternalist and philanthropic traditions with the socialist politics of the inter-war years underlines the inherent adaptability of the conservative reform narrative, that saw More's claiming of the parish as the gentlewoman's sphere transformed into the expanded and politicised parochial spheres of Yonge, Eliot and Ward. Whilst increasingly under threat from the radical arguments of the Langham Place

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 513.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 5; p. 515.

Group and the female suffrage campaigners as the Victorian era progressed, the maternal community sphere as imagined by nineteenth-century women writers thus offered a different and yet more traditional model of female empowerment. This model challenges our persistent separation of nineteenth-century society into public and private spheres. Crucially, it replaces our understanding of the Victorian woman as imprisoned in her own domesticity with an image of a nineteenth-century philanthropic heroine authoritative and active throughout her parish.

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